ROMANTIC STORIES OF THE WEST

15¢

UNE

THRILLING RANCH STORIES

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FEATURING

SIX-GUN SCHOOLMA'AM

A Romantic Novel of the Oregon Trail

By SYL MacDOWELL

Your credit is OK

I'm going to send you your choice of these selected FEATURES

BULOVA'S $33.75
Miss America

R231 – Newest Bulova feature; 17 jewels; tiny 10K yellow gold filled case. Gorgeous creation priced low. Complete in gift box.
$3.28 a month

1/4 CARAT DIAMOND $42.50

A173 – Greatest diamond value in our history – a brilliant 1/4 carat diamond attractively set in 14K yellow gold Engagement Ring. A remarkable value at our low price.
$4.15 a month

YOUR CHOICE KENT WATCHES $15.95

P200–Ladies' Kent Heart Watch with bracelet to match. K152–Man's Kent round watch with sweep-second hand. Both 7 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate cases.
$1.50 a month

SEND ME $1

and I'll send your choice of these selected VALUES for 10 DAY TRIAL and 10 MONTHS TO PAY. Money back if not Satisfied . . .

Yes – your credit is OK with me – I'LL TRUST YOU. Tell me what you want–put a dollar bill in an envelope with your name, address, occupation and a few other facts about yourself–I'll send your choice of these select values for your approval and 10 day trial. If you are not satisfied that you have received good, honest dollar for dollar value, send it back and I'll promptly return your dollar. If satisfied, you'll pay in 10 small monthly amounts you'll never miss.

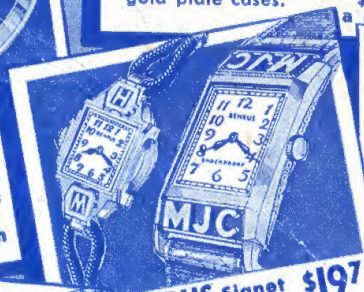
Jim Feeney
Sales Mgr.

FREE TO ADULTS . . .

A Postcard brings my complete 48-Page Catalog showing hundreds of diamonds, watches, jewelry and silverware, all offered on my 10-Months-to-Pay Plan.

BRIDAL SET $29.75

A87/C81 – 3 diamond Engagement Ring; 7 diamond Wedding Ring; both 14K yellow gold.
$2.88 a month



BENRUS Signet $19.75
Watches – Choice

T561 – Ladies' Watch. 0563 – Man's Watch. Initials set in cases. 10K yellow rolled gold plate; 7 jewels. Mention number and initials.
$1.88 a month

MAN'S Initial RING $16.95

I202 – Massive Ring with 2 diamonds and initial on black onyx. 10K yellow gold.
$1.60 a month

Carnelian Cameo HEART LOCKET $4.50

W722 – Genuine carnelian cameo in yellow gold filled Heart Locket. With chain.
$1 a month

BULOVA'S New Senator $33.75

M222–Bulova's newest feature for men–a 17 jewel watch with 10K yellow rolled gold plate case. A new 1940 feature.
$3.28 a month

L.W. Sweet

MAIL ORDER DIVISION of FINLAY STRAUS

Dept. 720F 1670 BROADWAY·NEW YORK

TREMENDOUS PRICE SLASH

Genuine OFFICE SIZE de luxe MODEL

UNDERWOOD No. 5

with Late Improved Features

$102.50 MODEL
1/3 MFRS. ORIG. PRICE

Now $31.85 CASH PRICE
or
on Easy Terms of 60¢ a WEEK

Yours THE GREATEST TYPEWRITER BARGAIN EVER OFFERED!
Actually Less than 1/3 MFRS. ORIG. PRICE!

Buy direct from us and save over $70.00 on genuine office model Underwood No. 5. Beautifully rebuilt and unconditional 2 year guarantee. No money down — See before you buy on 10 day trial. Pay on easiest terms—only 60c a week.

Thousands paid $102.50 for this machine, but it's yours for only $31.85 (cash price) and you get FREE with Underwood No. 5 a sturdy Roll-A-Way Typewriter Stand and Touch Typing Course.

NO MONEY DOWN

NO OBLIGATION. SEND NO MONEY—Try Universal No. 5 for 10 full days in your home—without risk. See for yourself the neat, perfect work it does. Decide without salesman's pressure—without hurry.

10 DAY TRIAL

SEE BEFORE YOU BUY—Test. Inspect. Compare. This Underwood No. 5 is shipped to you on its merit alone. It must sell itself—must convince you of its tremendous value.

2 YEAR GUARANTEE

Our 2 yr. guarantee is your assurance of satisfaction. *You must be satisfied* that this is the biggest value ever offered in a typewriter.

Easiest Terms Only 60c a Week!

Only 60c a week soon pays for your typewriter at this low price. Use machine as you pay for it. Only $2.50 a month—less than the cost of renting an inferior machine. Order your Underwood now!

FREE!

ROLL-A-WAY SECRETARIAL TYPEWRITER STAND

YOURS AT NO EXTRA COST WITH YOUR UNDERWOOD—If you send your order now. Makes every typewriter portable. Sturdy, compact, weighs but a few pounds—can be moved by touch of finger. *Try Underwood No. 5 for 10 days, and stand goes to you immediately on receipt of first payment.*

FREE—a complete home study course of Famous Van Zandt Touch Typing system. Learn to type quickly and easily.

UNDERWOOD—The World's Most Popular Typewriter!

Underwood—the typewriter recognized as the finest, strongest built! Think of this value! World Famous office size Underwood No. 5 completely rebuilt with late improved features—Yours for less than 1/3 the mfrs. orig. price. **This Underwood No. 5 has all standard equipment**—84 character, 4 row keyboard, 2 color ribbon, back spacer, automatic reverse, tabulator, shift lock, etc. A perfect all purpose typewriter—stands hard, long service—No risk—You See Before You Buy—Fully guaranteed and backed by 30 years of fair dealing.

EXTRA—14 inch oversize carriage for only $3.00 more. Provides 12" writing line for large office forms, billing, etc.

Accept this offer now—limited quantity—no more when they're gone. Send no money. Try machine for 10 days—Pay on easiest terms. 2 yr. guarantee. Avoid disappointment—Mail now.

MAIL this COUPON

INTERNATIONAL TYPEWRITER EXCHANGE
231 W. Monroe, Chicago, Ill.

Over 200,000 SATISFIED CUSTOMERS All Over the World.

INTERNATIONAL TYPEWRITER EXCHANGE
Dept. 688, 231 W. Monroe St., Chicago, Ill.

Send Underwood No. 5 (F. O. B. Chicago) for 10 days' trial. If I keep it, I will pay $2.50 per month until easy-term price ($36.35) is paid. If I am not satisfied I can return it express collect. **FOR QUICK SHIPMENT GIVE OCCUPATION AND REFERENCE.**

Name..... Age.....

Address.....

Town..... State.....

NOTE: Typewriter stand sent on receipt of first payment. If payment is enclosed, mark here ☐

STATE CARRIAGE SIZE HERE .....

EVERY STORY BRAND-NEW

THRILLING RANCH STORIES

Vol. XXI, No. 3 G. B. FARNUM, Editor June, 1940

Complete Romantic Novel

SIX-GUN SCHOOLMA'AM . . . . . Syl MacDowell 14
Sandra Lane, Bent on Avenging Her Brother's Death, Heads for Plenty of Colt Trouble on the Oregon Trail!

Two Complete Novelets

DAUGHTER OF DANGER VALLEY . . . . Robert E. Obets 70
To Carry on Her Father's Unfinished Work, Leah Barret Defies Hostile Ranchers and Outlaws!

LOVE RIDES THE MESA . . . . . Tom Curry 116
Ellen Cowan Travels the Trail of Gunsmoke and Turmoil to Reach Her Heart's Desire!

Thrilling Short Stories

SUDDEN ROMANCE . . . . . George E. Magee 50
Gail Bentley Pins Her Hope of Love and Security on a Stranger

BRANDED BY LOVE . . . . . Wilton West 59
Chip Takes the Straight Road—to Find it is Cupid's Own Trail

HALF-PINT JANE . . . . . Eugene A. Clancy 89
A Strange Waddy's Kiss Brings Trouble to the Darling of the Circle W

GUN PLAYBOY . . . . . Joe Archibald 103
Hattie Pringle Cuts a Badman Out of a Great Romantic Triangle

MAN AFRAID OF HORSES . . . . . Oscar Schisgall 133
Judy Uses Her Wiles to Get Larry Bridger to Ride a Bronc

Special Features

BRANDING FIRE SONG BOOK . . . . . Tex Brown 114
Words and Music of "When My Workdays Are Over"

AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE . . . . . A Department 137
Where Readers and Club Members Meet

Join THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB! Coupon on Page 142

THRILLING RANCH STORIES published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc., at 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Entire contents copyright, 1940, by Better Publications, Inc. Subscriptions yearly, $.90; single copies, $.15; foreign and Canadian postage extra. Entered as second class matter November 9, 1933, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. 173

Read our Companion Magazines: Thrilling Western, Texas Rangers, Popular Western, Sky Fighters, Thrilling Mystery, Range Riders, Thrilling Adventures, Thrilling Love, Thrilling Detective, Thrilling Wonder Stories, Thrilling Sports, Popular Detective, G-Men, West, Popular Sports Magazine, Popular Love, The Phantom Detective, Detective Novels Magazine, Everyday Astrology, The Lone Eagle, Thrilling Spy Stories, Masked Rider Western Magazine, The Rio Kid Western, Black Book Detective Magazine, Startling Stories, Strange Stories, Captain Future, and The Ghost.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

I WILL SEND MY FIRST LESSON FREE

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 25 years
He has directed the training of more men for the Radio Industry than anyone else.

It Shows How I Train You at Home in Your Spare Time for a

GOOD JOB IN RADIO

Clip the coupon and mail it. I'm certain I can train you at home in your spare time to be a Radio Technician. I will send you my first lesson free. Examine it, read it, see how clear and easy it is to understand. Judge for yourself whether my course is planned to help you get a good job in Radio, a young growing field with a future. You don't need to give up your present job, or spend a lot of money to become a Radio Technician. I train you at home in your spare time.

Jobs Like These Go to Men Who Know Radio

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, technicians and pay well for trained men. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good pay jobs with opportunities for advancement. Radio jobbers and dealers employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio loudspeaker systems, electronic devices, are newer fields offering good opportunities to qualified men. And my Course includes Television, which promises to open many good jobs soon.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio is already one of the country's large industries even though it is still young and growing. The arrival of Television, the use of Radio principles in industry, are but a few of many recent Radio developments. More than 28,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Every year millions of Radios get out of date and are replaced. Millions more need new tubes, repairs, etc. Over 5,000,000 auto Radios are in use and thousands more are being sold every day. In every branch Radio is offering more opportunities—opportunities for which I give you the required knowledge of Radio at home in your spare time. Yes, the few hundred $30, $40, $50 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands.

Many Make $5 to $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, in addition to my regular course, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which start showing you how to do actual Radio repair jobs. Throughout your Course, I send plans and directions which have helped many make from $200 to $500 a year in spare time while learning.

You Get Practical Experience While Learning

I send you special Radio equipment, show you how to conduct experiments, build circuits illustrating important principles used in modern Radio and Television receivers, broadcasting station and loudspeaker installation. My 50-50 method of training gives you both printed instruction and actual work with Radio parts—makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act today. Mail the coupon for Sample Lesson and my 64-page Book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." They point out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tell about my course in Radio and Television; show letters from men I have trained telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, PRESIDENT, DEPT. OF09
NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE,
WASHINGTON, D. C.

I TRAINED THESE MEN

Service Manager for Four Stores

"I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N.R.I. In a few months I made enough to pay for the course three or four times. I am now Radio service manager for the M - - - - Furniture Co. for their four stores."—JAMES E. RYAN, 1543 Slade St., Fall River, Mass.

$200 to $300 a Month in Own Business

"For the last 2 years I have been in business for myself making between $200 and $300 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N.R.I. to thank for my start in this field." — ARLIE J. FROEHNER, 300 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.

$10 to $20 a Week in Spare Time

"I repaired many Radio sets when I was on my tenth lesson and I have made enough money to pay for my Radio course and also my instruments. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made $600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of $10 to $20 a week — just spare time."—JOHN JERRY, 1529 Arapahoe St., Denver, Colo.

A Tested WAY to BETTER PAY

MAIL COUPON NOW!

GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK SAMPLE LESSON FREE

Mr. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. OF09
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

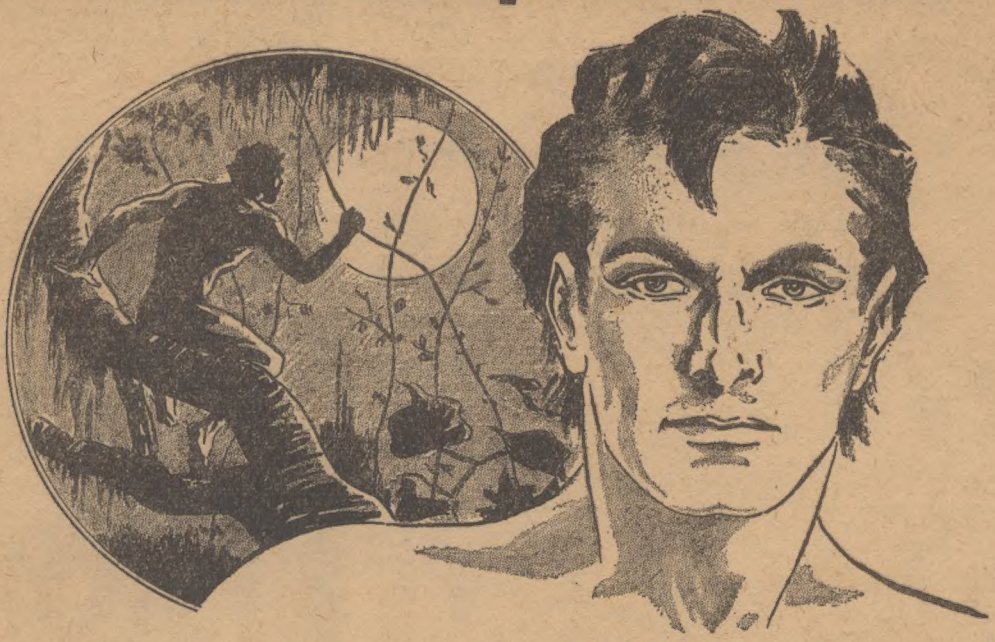
Dear Mr. Smith: Mail me FREE, without obligation, your Sample Lesson and 64-page book, "Rich Rewards in Radio" which tells about Radio's spare time and full-time opportunities and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home to be Radio Technicians. No salesman will call. (Please write or print plainly.)

NAME.....AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....2FR

The Thrill Scoop of the Year!



TARZAN

AND THE JUNGLE MURDERS

A BRAND-NEW COMPLETE NOVEL

By EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

AMERICA'S MOST POPULAR AUTHOR

•

Featured in the June Issue of

THRILLING ADVENTURES

NOW ON SALE — 10¢ — AT ALL STANDS

TRAIN TO QUALIFY FOR RADIO-TELEVISION

A Flexible Plan to Fit Your Immediate Needs

National Schools' training is planned to fit your present circumstances. You can master Radio, Television, Sound and allied trades by National's exclusive plan. Actual shop and studio training; also complete training if you cannot give up your present employment and income. A definite plan to fit your needs. You can qualify for good pay positions in this ever-advancing and always-interesting field. Hundreds of young men with little previous preparation have already done it with the thorough up-to-date training given exclusively by National Schools—located right at the heart of one of the most active centers of Radio in the world.

COMMAND ANY OF THESE JOBS

- Radio Expert
- Radio Broadcasting
- Sound
- Talking Pictures
- Studio Technician
- Television Technician

A Million-Dollar Institution

Think of the advantages of a million-dollar school. You can learn everything about Radio, from building and repairing receivers and transmitters to every phase of operation. Such training fits you for choice Radio positions—on land, water or in the air. A chance for adventure and good pay. National Schools offers you fully illustrated literature about the opportunities for fascinating and highly paid employment in Radio, Television, Sound Recording and related activities.

Pre-Tested Training for You

For 35 years National Schools, recognized leader in Trade instruction, has helped wide-awake men to success. Transportation allowance offered from any point in U. S. without extra cost. Earn room and board while learning. More than 35,000 graduates have been assisted. National Schools will supply you with a sincere, honest statement of facts about the opportunities in Radio and Television and show how you can earn more pay. No exaggerations; no misstatements. Pre-tested, easy-to-learn methods. Amazing facts are yours for the asking. Simply mail the coupon for free literature. No obligation.

Complete Course Qualifies You

National Schools' training is complete, including full instruction in Electrical Circuits, Broadcasting, Tubes, Receivers, Trouble Shooting, Antennas, Public Address Systems, Microphones, Amplifiers, Loud Speakers, Recording, Television Oscillators, Modulation, Transmitters, Projection—everything to qualify you for the job you want in stations, studios, service shops, factories and at sea.

MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY

FREE LITERATURE POST PAID

NATIONAL SCHOOLS, Dept. TGR-6
4000 South Figueroa Street, Los Angeles, Calif.
Request for Free Literature on Radio and Television

NAME_____ AGE_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ STATE_____

We are definitely interested in helping men of limited income and "Blind Alley" job holders.

NATIONAL SCHOOLS

LOS ANGELES, CALIF.

(Established 1905)

TRAIN FOR **ELECTRICITY**
12 WEEKS TRAINING
THIS QUICK EASIER WAY
ACTUAL SHOP WORK- NOT BOOKS

Have you ever dreamed of holding down a good pay job—that would give you all the things in life you wanted? If so, quit dreaming and prepare for such a job. Electricity offers you a real job and a real future if you will prepare yourself by training to take your place in this giant industry.

H. C. Lewis

Here at my school you are trained **in 12 weeks** for your start for a better job and a real future. You are trained on **real electrical machinery and equipment.** You work on generators, motors, dynamos, you wire houses, wind armatures, etc. You also get training in **Diesel, Electric Refrigeration** and **Air Conditioning** plus **an extra 4 weeks course in Radio.** My methods make it easy to learn—First you are told how to do a thing—then you are shown **how to do it—then you do the work yourself.**

I'LL FINANCE YOUR TRAINING

You can get this training first—then pay **for the most of it after you graduate.** If you need part time work to help with living expenses, we will help you get it. After graduation you get lifetime employment service. **Send coupon for free catalog and all details**

I WILL INCLUDE AN EXTRA 4 WEEKS COURSE IN RADIO

Mr. H. C. Lewis, President
COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
500 S. Paulina St., Dept. AO-84
Chicago, Ill.

Dear Mr. Lewis: Send me the book that tells the story of your training and your offer to help me get this training.

NAME.....
ADDRESS.....
CITY..... STATE.....

SONG & SONG POEM WRITERS

We want original songs, poems and lyrics with commercial appeal for recordings. WE SUPPLY MELODIES for poems and lyrics accepted. Monthly awards for best songs. HOLLYWOOD RECORDING STUDIOS, Dept. B2, Box 87, Preuss Sta., Los Angeles, Calif.

FREE! TO INVENTORS!

MAKING INVENTIONS PAY!

NOW! FREE to inventors—an amazing beautifully illustrated 32-page book which gives "inside" information on inventing for profit. No cost. No obligation. Write for your book today!
CRESCENT TOOL CO., Dept. TR, CINCINNATI, OHIO

EARN EXTRA MONEY *at Home*

Increase your income at home by new, simple Wentworth Tempera Color method. We instruct you and supply you with work. Write today for FREE BOOKLET.

Wentworth Pictorial Co., Ltd., Dept. 160, Hamilton, Ont.

MYSTERIOUS DEVICE **WELDS** BRAZES AND SOLDERS
ANYONE CAN OPERATE

Now, an electric welding, brazing and soldering Torch, complete with power unit, goggles and supplies. **Works INSTANTLY off any light socket.** Does a thousand and one repair jobs at amazingly LOW COST on aluminum, iron, steel and other metals. **Indispensable** for Auto, Body and Fender Repairs, and home repairs—shop, factory, farm, engineer, janitor, sheet metal, radio and bicycle repairs. Anyone can handle without previous experience with our simple instructions. **10-DAY HOME TRIAL**
Write at once for Special Introductory Low Price Offer. Try 3 in 1 Electric Torch for 10 days at our risk, or get one free by helping to introduce it. ELECTRO-TORCH CO., 2813-HZ, Michigan Ave., Chicago

THE SINISTER DR. CYCLOPS!

© Paramount Pictures, Inc.

YOUR local theatre will soon be featuring DR. CYCLOPS, a strange drama of men in miniature, on the screen. But you can read this startling story FIRST in THRILLING WONDER STORIES when Henry Kuttner, star fantasy author, brings you a complete science fiction novelet you will never forget!

DR. CYCLOPS is the dramatic story of a scientist vested with unearthly powers. Strange, unholy experiments are produced in his laboratory. Then one day Dr. Cyclops achieves his master secret—men in miniature!

DR. CYCLOPS is packed with thrills and action!

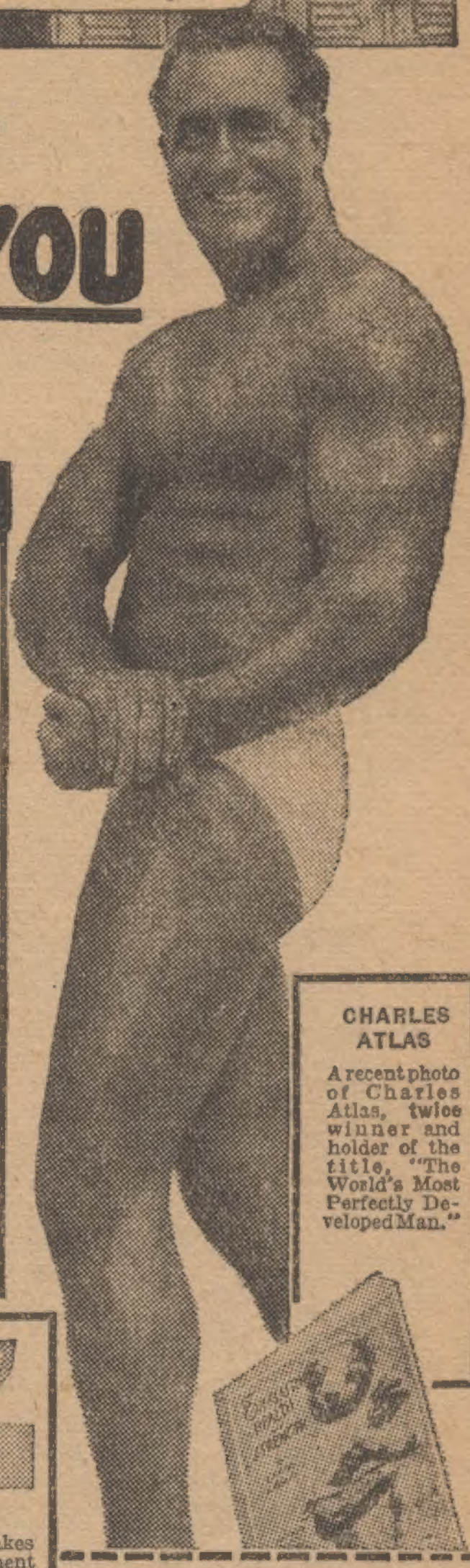
●

Read it in the June

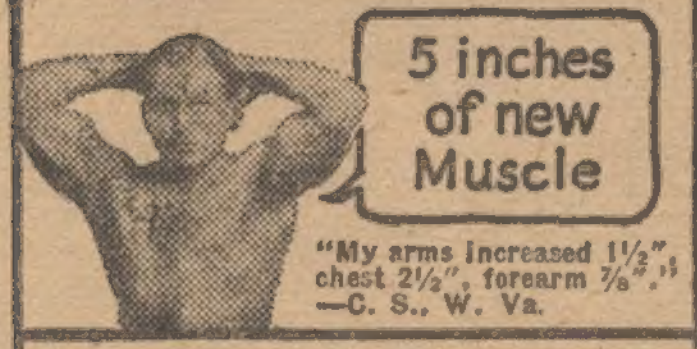
THRILLING WONDER STORIES

NOW ON SALE 15¢ AT ALL STANDS

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?



LET ME START SHOWING RESULTS FOR YOU



"My arms increased 1½", chest 2½", forearm ⅞".; —C. S., W. Va.

"Have put 3½" on chest (normal) and 2½" expanded." — F. S., N. Y.

"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress. Certainly recommend you for quick results."—W. G., N. J.

"Your method gives long, smooth muscle. When I started, I weighed only 141. Now weigh 170." T.K., N.Y.

CHARLES ATLAS

A recent photo of Charles Atlas, twice winner and holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

7-Day TRIAL OFFER

I could fill this whole magazine with enthusiastic reports from OTHERS. But what you want to know is—"What can Atlas do for ME?"

Find out—*at my risk!* Just give me a 7-day trial. Just one week!—and even in that short time I'll start giving RESULTS. AND it will be the kind of RESULTS that you (and anyone else) can SEE, FEEL, MEASURE with a tape!

THIS STERLING SILVER CUP BEING GIVEN AWAY. — This valuable cup stands about 14" high on a mahogany base.

I will award it to my pupil who makes the most improvement in his development within the next three months.

FREE BOOK

I myself was once a 97-pound weakling—sickly, half-alive. Then I discovered "Dynamic Tension." And I twice won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"!

"Dynamic Tension" has done so much for other fellows that I simply ask you to let me prove that it can make a new man of YOU—that it can start new inches of power pushing out your chest—build up your shoulders to champion huskiness—put new, hard, firm muscles on your biceps — make those stomach muscles of yours hard ridges!

Why not risk a postage stamp? Send coupon for my 48-page illustrated FREE BOOK AT ONCE! Address me personally: Charles Atlas, Dept. 776, 115 E. 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 776,
115 East 23rd Street,
New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that DYNAMIC TENSION will help make a new man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength"*—and full details of your 7-DAY Trial Offer.

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City..... State.....

AUDELS Carpenters and Builders Guides 4 vols. $6

Inside Trade Information for Carpenters, Builders, Joiners, Building Mechanics and all Woodworkers. These Guides give you the short-cut instructions that you want—including new methods, ideas, solutions, plans, systems and money saving suggestions. An easy progressive course for the apprentice and student. A practical daily helper and Quick Reference for the master worker. Carpenters everywhere are using these Guides as a Helping Hand to Easier Work, Better Work and Better Pay. To get this assistance for yourself, simply fill in and mail the FREE COUPON below.

Inside Trade Information On:

How to use the steel square—How to file and set saws—How to build furniture—How to use a mitre box—How to use the chalk line—How to use rules and scales—How to make joints—Carpenters arithmetic—Solving mensuration problems—Estimating strength of timbers—How to set girders and sills—How to frame houses and roofs—How to estimate costs—How to build houses, barns, garages, bungalows, etc.—How to read and draw plans—Drawing up specifications—How to excavate—How to use settings 12, 13 and 17 on the steel square—How to build hoists and scaffolds—skylights—How to build stairs—How to put on interior trim—How to hang doors—How to lath—lay floors—How to paint

THEO. AUDEL & CO., 49 W. 23rd St., New York City

Mail Audels Carpenters and Builders Guides, 4 vols., on 7 days' free trial. If O.K. I will remit $1 in 7 days, and $1 monthly until $6 is paid. Otherwise I will return them. No obligation unless I am satisfied.

Name.....

Address.....

Occupation.....

Reference.....T F

High School Course at Home

Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work — prepares you for entrance to college. Standard H. S. texts supplied — Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. HA-58, Drexel, at 58th, Chicago

BE A PASSENGER TRAFFIC INSPECTOR

Railway and Bus—Study in Spare Time

You can qualify by our simple, home-study course as *Railway Traffic Inspector* and earn up to $135 per month plus expenses at start. We place graduates *or refund tuition.* Agreeable, interesting work. Free Booklet describes our 21 years' experience in this service. STANDARD BUSINESS TRAINING INSTITUTE, Div. 8506, Buffalo, N. Y.

AGENTS MAKE MONEY

Start making money at once in a simple, pleasant, all year 'round business, distributing home necessities. Over 200 fast selling, quick repeating, nationally known products guaranteed to satisfy. Earnings start very first day with my sure-fire Plan and big Outfit, including a large assortment of full size packages. Full or part time. Liberal credit plan. Old-established company. Write quick for my Offer.

E. J. MILLS, 1717 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, O.

A Laugh on Every Page

Now on Sale **25c** *At All Stands*

EXCITING STORIES OF THE WAR ON ESPIONAGE IN AMERICA *in* THRILLING SPY STORIES

ON SALE EVERYWHERE

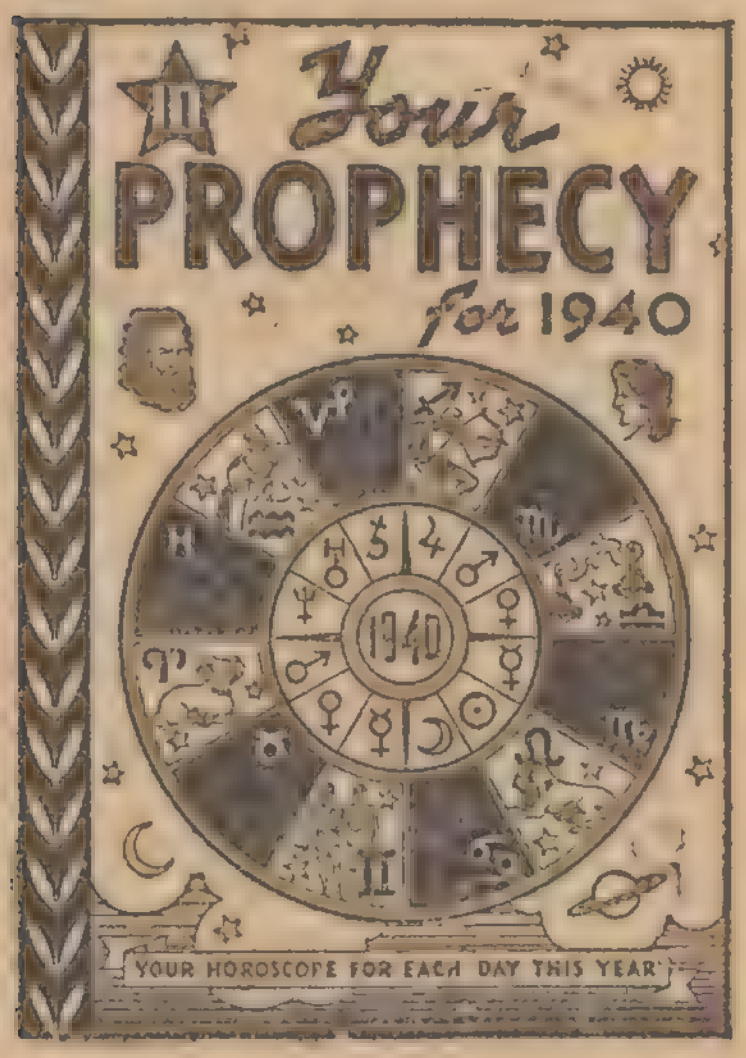
10c

AT ALL STANDS

America's New Favorite!

NOW ON SALE **10¢** AT ALL STANDS

Your Star Guide for the Entire Year!



Now on Sale **10c** At All Stands

ACCOUNTANCY

One of America's best paying professions

These Are OPPORTUNITY DAYS for the Trained ACCOUNTANT!

WITH new state and federal legislation requiring more accurate accounting from businesses than ever before, the trained accountant is certainly a man to be envied. Much in demand, member of "America's best-paid profession," an important figure in affairs, **he is one of the most influential and *necessary* individuals in the whole business scheme!**

His is a profession YOU may be considering at this moment. If so, don't fail also to consider critically how, when, and from whom you will secure your Higher Accountancy training. Consider particularly LaSalle's record of more than 500,000 Accountancy-trained men and women during the past thirty years—a record unsurpassed by any other educational institution.

Remember, too, how numerous are the available accountancy schools and courses in the country. Yet, despite this fact, ***approximately one-tenth of all C.P.A.'s*** have been student members of LaSalle.

As to the training itself, you will find it absolutely complete; from Elements through to Accounting Systems, and a choice of twelve post-graduate electives, including C. P. A. Coaching that qualifies you thoroughly.

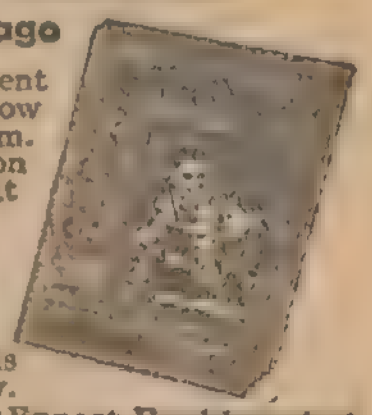
Spare-time study does it all! No interference with your present work and a careful analysis of thousands of student histories reveals that some have realized, in increased later earnings, as high as $50 returns on every hour devoted to such study.

If you are actually in earnest—are willing to work devotedly for your future success, look into this subject carefully, thoughtfully, and from every angle. Full information and a 48-page survey of this opportunity field will be sent you on request.

Sign and mail coupon for complete details

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
A Correspondence Institution

Dept. 6329-HR **Chicago**



Kindly tell me more about the present opportunities in Accounting and how your training can help me grasp them. Also send me—free—your booklet on "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays."

☐ **Higher Accountancy**

Other LaSalle Opportunities:

If more interested in one of the fields indicated below, check and mail now.

☐ Business Management
☐ Modern Salesmanship
☐ Law—Degree of LL. B.
☐ Commercial Law
☐ Expert Bookkeeping
☐ C. P. A. Coaching
☐ Traffic Management
☐ Stenotypy

Name.....

Present Position.....

Address.....

BACKACHE?

Try Flushing Excess Poisons And Acid Thru Kidneys And Stop Getting Up Nights

35 CENTS PROVES IT

When your kidneys are overtaxed and your bladder is irritated and passage scanty and often smarts and burns, you may need Gold Medal Haarlem Oil Capsules, a fine harmless stimulant and diuretic that starts to work at once and costs but 35 cents at any modern drugstore.

It's one good safe way to put more healthy activity into kidneys and bladder — you should sleep more soundly the whole night through. But be sure to get **GOLD MEDAL** — it's a genuine medicine for weak kidneys — right from Haarlem in Holland. Don't accept a substitute.

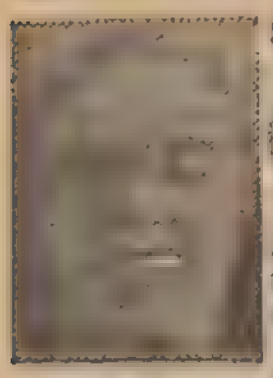
MEN WANTED

Side Line—Spare Time—Full Time

BIG CASH COMMISSIONS IN ADVANCE DAILY

Complete line of EVERYDAY BUSINESS NECESSITIES —over 2000 fast selling, steady repeating items for all retail merchants, gas stations, business office, etc., at a saving of more than half. You take orders. We deliver! Elaborate SAMPLE DISPLAY OUTFIT sent FREE. Write quick.

NORTHWESTERN, 625-X, West Jackson, Chicago, Ill.



SEND NO MONEY!—Save Money!

TRANSPARENT PARTIAL

30 Days' Trial ✓ **BEADLESS**

We make **FALSE TEETH** for *you* by **MAIL** from *your own* mouth-impression. **Money-Back Guarantee of Satisfaction.**

$8.85 to $25

FREE Free impression material, directions, catalog.

Professional Model **U. S. Dental Co., Dept. 6-82, Chicago, Ill.**

WANTED

ORIGINAL SONG POEMS

any subject. **YOU CAN** write the words for a song. Don't delay—send us your poem for immediate consideration.

RICHARD BROS., 74 Woods Building, Chicago, Ill.

USED Correspondence Courses

Complete home-study courses and educational books, slightly used. Sold, rented, exchanged. All subjects. Money-back guarantee. Cash paid for used courses. Full details and illustrated 72-page bargain catalog FREE. Write today!

NELSON CO.

F-227 Manhattan Bldg., Chicago

PAYS Up To 178% PROFIT

60 second Demonstration.

MAGIC-DISC HEATS WATER INSTANTLY!

EVERY HOME CAN AFFORD THIS AMAZING LOW COST NEW IMPROVED ELECTRIC WATER HEATER

Made by an OLD Reliable Company. Amazing New Principle Heats Water Instantly. Just plug in the light socket. SELLS FAST and Pays Agents up to 178% PROFIT. No Risk SAMPLE OFFER. Write at once for details.

THE LUX COMPANY

Dept. H-128 Elkhart, Ind.

Meet

GEORGE CHANCE

THE MAGICIAN-SLEUTH

in

THE GHOST

Super-Detective

NOW ON SALE 10¢ AT ALL STANDS

AMERICA'S BEST FICTION, FOTOS AND FUN IN

COLLEGE HUMOR

The Smart Magazine

•

15c AT ALL STANDS

GET IT TODAY!

FEATURING THE EXPLOITS OF

MAJOR MARS

AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

The World's Greatest Sleuth Tackles a Grim Mystery of Baffling Clues

in

THE PHANTOM HITS MURDER STEEL

A Full Book-Length Novel in the June Issue of

THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE

EVERY MONTH 10c AT ALL STANDS

Big League Baseball players are trained men—they are there because of TRAINING plus experience. It is the same in the rapidly growing Diesel industry—those "on top," didn't just happen. They were trained—by long experience—or by intensive schooling. Hemphill Diesel training is a short-cut to practical experience. Find out about it.

Today's giant Diesels, in industry, buses, trains, boats and trucks, are masterpieces of engineering development. They require skilled and trained men to service, adjust, repair and maintain them. Before you can "know how," you must "learn how." Find out about Hemphill training. You can start to learn at home—take shop work later. Day or night shop courses also. Investigate, mail coupon today. No obligation. Get your free copy of "March of Diesel."

HEMPHILL DIESEL SCHOOLS

All communications concerning enrollment in any of the Hemphill Diesel Courses should be sent to one of the following addresses:

NEW YORK	31-31 Queens Blvd., L. I. City
CHICAGO	2030 Larrabee Street
MEMPHIS	449 Monroe Avenue
LOS ANGELES	2010 San Fernando Rd.
VANCOUVER, B. C.	1367 Granville Street

HEMPHILL DIESEL SCHOOLS (use nearest address)

★ Please send data on your Diesel courses, also free copy of illustrated booklet "March of Diesel."

Name_____ Age____

Street_____

City_____ State_____ m-46-t

A Romantic Novel

Six-Gun

Sandra Lane, Bent on Avenging Her Brother's Death, Heads for Plenty of Colt Trouble on the Oregon Trail!

By SYL MacDOWELL

Author of "Seed of the Six-Gun," "Squaw-man's Gal," etc.

CHAPTER I

A Death Letter

IT WAS mail day at Ashridge. The mountain folk in the cross-roads store grouped around the little post office window while Eph Elder sorted out the slim packet dropped off by the weekly stage. It was mostly mail-order catalogues and farm journals. But from among them the old postmaster selected a letter worn from much travel and handling.

The postmark was "Fort Bent, Oregon Territory," and it was addressed to "Andrew Lane & Family."

Old Eph held it up against the light and tried to peer through the envelope. He made no bones about his curiosity. He knew more about

A Courageous Girl Braves Wilderness

Schoolma'am

"Drop it!" she screamed, desperation in her cry

With the Love in Her Heart as Guide!

Ashridge folks and their scattered kin than some themselves knew, and this was one way he kept posted.

But this letter defied his prying interest. So he shrugged and slid it through the cubbyhole window.

"There ye be, Sandy," he chirped. "It's fum out West, where yore brother Bob went. Though I don't reckernize the writin' as his'n."

A girl who looked to be about nineteen seized it eagerly. The reaching hand was white and slim, like the rest of her. Her fingernails were not yet broken and blunted, like those of other mountain women. She wore a calico dress, plain cut and unflattering, like the rest of them. But the spring breeze that eddied through the store tugged at it, giving pleasant proof that her body was as slim and shapely as her hands.

She stepped nearer the store window, where mellow morning sunlight glinted the red-gold in her long, wavy hair, knotted loosely at the back of her neck. Her eyes, green-flecked blue, like leaves against the sky, were a little anxious as she ripped open the letter and swiftly scanned the writing.

It was in Bob's writing, heavy and angular:

Dear Folks: You can tell them stay-at-home hillbillies in old Missoury that this big new country deserves all the fine things said about it. All it needs is plowing, planting and pioneers. It needs folks like us all, spunky enough to come, and strong enough to stay and hold onto it. I drew a section of the prettiest land in all God's creation, and I want you all to hurry along, if Ma's able. By spring there'll be wagon trains with soldiers escorting, so don't be skeered about Injuns. The thing to fear is when you get here, land grabbers. Up out of Texas, now that the big trail drives are about over, cattlemen are coming, and grabbing up the free range. One of them called on me a short spell ago, claiming priority to this section and talking trouble. I let him see the Colt Dad gave me, the mate to his, and told that range hog if he came again the six-gun would do my arguing. The fellow's name is Car—

There the letter abruptly ended, where an ink blot merged into a reddish-brown stain which Sandra Lane recognized as dried blood.

But there was a curt message under that, in another hand. With teeth clenching her warm, ripe lip, the girl read on:

Robert Lane was buried in the post cemetery three weeks ago. He was found dead in his cabin on Antelope Creek, with a bullet hole in his back. Personal effects of the deceased are held here, awaiting claimant. His land claim will be voided in six months, unless reentry is made by next of kin.

Captain Bruce Bartow, U.S.A.
Fort Bent, O.T.

EPH ELDER bustled from behind the post office partition, to resume his rôle of storekeeper. But with one quick, searching look at the girl's face, he halted.

"Bad news, Sandy? That young hothead, Bob, got hisself in trouble? All you Lanes are the fightin' kind, more'n the writin' kind. Ready to scrap at the drop of a—"

His voice trailed off to a pause. He stepped closer, and his tone became more sympathetic.

"'Tain't too serious, is it, gal?"

Sandra Lane was stunned, utterly unresponsive. Dark grief surged through her bosom, seeking an outlet. It came in a single dry, awful sob. Then she rushed from the store.

The next moment, with hair flying, she raced out of the crossroads settlement, heeling the small sorrel under her into a wild run, out along a rutted clay road that plunged into the cool, green hills. The kindly Ozark wilderness swallowed her. She did not draw rein until she came to a shaded glen, walled in with new spring leaves, splashed with the snowy bloom of dogwood and bright redbud. She slid from the McClellan saddle, flung herself to the mossy earth and gave way unrestrainedly to pent-up sorrow.

After the outburst passed she sat up and wiped away her tears. A slow, rising fury was driving the grief out of her. Fury, first of all, against her

brother's killer, for the Lanes were a fiercely feudal clan. And secondly, against the brutally terse postscript of the army captain, and its taunting lack of detail.

But the one grim detail that was guilt evidence was there in what Bob had written, as though his last, living act had been directed by an avenging fate. It danced in Sandra's brain in letters of fire. His enemy was one whose name began with C-a-r.

That was all. What was that name? Carter, Carpenter, Carson, Carroll, Carberry?

She brushed this futile speculation aside with sudden, harsh impatience. What good would it do if she knew? None of the living Lanes were there to strike back at Bob's killer. In times past, Andrew Lane had avenged his own with fist and bullet. But Ma was ailing now, and that was the millweight that sagged his shoulders. Little likelihood was there for him to join the spring migration to faraway Oregon Territory.

Sandra remembered now that it was for medicine for Ma's cough that she had gone to Ashridge this morning. The letter that ended in a blood blot had made her forget all about that errand. She got to her feet and wondered if she had the courage to return to the store.

She rejected the idea almost as soon as it came.

"The shelf medicine never did help her any," the girl reasoned. "It would help her even less if I brought it back with—with this."

Her hand went to the letter crumpled against her bosom.

"What is means," she moaned, "is that I'm packing Ma's death warrant, here inside my waist!"

She pressed her tear-streaked face against the little sorrel's warm neck.

"Oh, Lady Belle, if I just didn't have to go home! If I just could keep it from her that—that Bob is dead!"

She jerked suddenly erect, her own words bringing a daring thought such

Bruce Bartow

as never would have come in a calmer moment. Or if she had not been a fiery-headed Lane.

Wagon trains rolled in the spring. It was spring now. All through the mountains there was talk about how emigrants were swarming to the starting point at Independence, forty miles away. Under the letter her heart pounded wildly as her resolve grew.

"Who's next of kin?" she breathed. "I am! Not that the land matters now. It's Bob's feud I've inherited! And I'm going to collect!"

WITHOUT estimating the slender resources of her own youth and inexperience, pitted against strangers in an unknown land, she sprang to saddle again and sent Lady Belle into a lope, past the road forks that led to her home, straight up to a hickory crest.

She paused there to let the little sorrel blow, as she gazed across the green infinitude of the Ozarks, toward Independence. And somewhere beyond, far beyond the hazy horizon, toward Oregon Territory. . . .

She was out of the hills by dusk, in

a yellow clay lane between split rail fences that seemed in a friendly conspiracy to keep her unswervingly to her resolve, but which did not halt the cool, earthy scent of fresh-plowed fields beyond. And then presently, another familiar aroma of cooking food reminded her sharply of her hunger.

An instant later she saw a shaft of light from some habitation on a wooded knoll to her left and a little ahead. Lady Belle perked up her ears and went into a brisk canter.

Sandra reined up in front of a dog-trot cabin of mud-chinked logs. Sparks from the rough stone chimney played tag with the fireflies. She called out, dismounted, and a creaking door was kicked open. A tall, gaunt man with a black mask of beard loomed against the candlelight from within.

He peered out, a limp length of flour sacking dangling from his belt, and one hand gripping a long-handled skillet. It sagged in his hand as he stared until grease dribbled over the edge, splashed on the stone threshold, and spattered onto his bare toes. The man yelped, dropped the skillet, and danced around, clasping the injured foot.

Sandra rushed past him, into the cabin. On a hewn table was a smattering of flour where dough had been rolled. She scooped up a handful, turned to the man, thrust him onto a bench and poulticed the grease scald with the flour.

"It won't blister now," she assured him.

He eyed her wonderingly, a smile appearing on his face.

"Missy," he said, "I wouldn't keer a hoot, but how in Tophet can I wear a boot?" And then he added apologetically: "Excuse the poetry talk. I only do it when I gets excited. Y'see, recitin' poetry is how I busted myself of the cussin' habit."

Sandra could not help from laughing.

"You must be very smart to think up rhymes off-hand, that way."

"Smart? Not me!" Then again in that sing-song chant: "If I live to be a hundred and ten, I'll never l'arn to write with a pen. Nope, never did have no eddication. Can barely spell out my name, which is Holeproof Hodkins."

"Holeproof? That's an odd name."

"Boys in Battery B, they named me that."

"Oh, then you're a soldier?"

"Was. From Harper's Ferry to Chattanooga." He jerked a thumb toward a long-barreled rifle resting on pegs above the fireplace. "See that Kaintuck rifle? It done earned me my name of Holeproof. I fit with it all through the Civil War, whilst the rest all packed Springfields. Me, I was a sharpshooter on the skirmish line and— Hold on, thar, missy! What ye up to now?"

SANDRA had picked up the cooling skillet, with what was left of the scattered pieces of half-fried side meat. She crossed in front of him with it, thrust the skillet into the ashes on the hearth, and raked some ash bread away from the heat of the fire.

"If yer invitin' yerself to supper, yer welcome," Holeproof Hodkins said, "but it hain't prudent."

"Why?"

"Nary a woman critter around here. I was born a bachelor and stayed that way ever since." He added forlornly, "Wimmen folks, they don't cotton to me. I'm mighty unhandsome under these here whiskers."

Studying her host more closely, Sandra decided that he was about the homeliest man she had ever seen. But there was a Lincolnlike warmth and simplicity in his gaunt awkwardness. She liked his eyes: deep, steadfast and friendly.

"It's not prudent to starve, either," she finally told him.

He limpingly dragged the bench to

the table and folded his long legs. He asked no questions. Perhaps that was why, as they ate, that Sandra told him who she was and the circumstances that had brought her to his door.

"Yer plumb set in gettin' along to Independence, then?" he asked disapprovingly.

"Tonight. It can't be more than twenty miles more."

CHAPTER II

"Holeproof" Hodkins

HOLEPROOF finished eating, got up and went outside. She heard him putting Lady Belle in a feed shed beyond the house, and shaking down a feed of hay. Then he hobbled back in.

"Chances are yer folks is worried some," he said. "You out after dark, and a storm makin'."

"I'll write them when I join the wagon train. I'll tell them I had a sudden chance to join Bob."

Holeproof wagged his head dubiously.

"Waal, I shore do hope ye don't jine him under that Oregon sod, Miss Sandy. But if ye got yer neck bowed to be gettin' along, I'll sort of dangle along, to guide ye. I know about every fork and ford in Missoury."

He pulled on a pair of worn cavalry boots, grimacing at the contact on his flour-packed foot. Then he went out again, and Sandra had the dishes washed when he returned to the house. A gust entered with him, and the mutter of distant thunder. And the girl caught a momentary glimpse of chain lightning.

"Them ain't hardly rain clothes ye got on," he observed.

He got out some man garb and an extra slicker.

"Better climb into them whilst I bring the hosses to the door," he said, leaving her again.

A few stray raindrops pattered on the shake roof as Sandra swiftly changed, bundled up her calico dress and went outside with it under one arm. The land lay black under misty stars. Holeproof was waiting with the little sorrel, and his own horse. He gave her the reins while he went inside and got the rifle.

They rode, then. The storm came, playing a seething undertone in the woods and dimming the slosh of hoofs under them. Holeproof rode a little in the lead, a comforting bulwark in the lonely night, his scalded foot dangling loosely from stirrup. Presently he turned into a trail that angled through a dense grove, southward.

Sandra pulled Lady Belle to a halt.

"Independence," she said, "lays to the west and north."

He half turned the tall roan under him.

"Ain't makin' for Independence, exackly."

"Then where?"

"Back to yore pa's house. If I had a dotter straying around, I'd be obliged to any man that'd ketch her up and bring her back."

"I'll find my way to Independence alone!" she flared. "Thank you, and good night!"

She sent Lady Belle bolting down the road. Holeproof pounded after her. The little sorrel dashed through a shallow overflow beside a rising creek. Mud and water drenched the man in a spray, but he caught up, then.

"Gosh, what a mule-headed gal!" he spluttered. "Waal, I done my best."

"Don't you try any more tricks, Holeproof, understand?" the girl declared sternly.

"Gosh, what's a pore man to do?" he sighed resignedly. "If I hadn't quit cussin', I'd turn the air blue!"

He was in the lead again, the roan forging with ease over familiar going, the little sorrel lagging jadedly. They went on through the night, heads bowed to the rain, speaking little. But Sandra was grateful for the

slicker and the man's jeans which made riding astride simpler than it would have been in a calico dress. . . .

GRAY, gloomy dawn at last. Smoldering campfires lifted dejected spirals of smoke from a quagmire of meadow that was jammed with wagons, livestock, and huddled people.

This was Independence, the jumping-off place. A huge encampment of west-bound settlers.

The man and girl were almost unnoticed in that confusion of high-piled wagons and soggy-walled tents. The irritable cries of young children mingled with the profane shouts of a teamster whose mule-drawn wagon was stuck hub-deep in a puddle. Dogs barked, cows bawled, axes whacked sharply into the sap-filled cores of logs as men searched for dry fuel, and a rooster crated to the tail-gate of a high-wheeled freighter crowed bravely and persistently.

Sandra and Holeproof halted their wet, tired horses beside a camp where a man knelt beside a smoldering fire, fanning it with his hat.

"Howdy, neighbor!" Holeproof sang out. "Looks like you might have room for a passenger."

The kneeling man twisted around, eyes red from the biting smoke.

"I hain't the Union Pacific," he retorted surlily.

"What ye haulin', Mister?"

"Whiskey. Beyond the Rockies, good old Missoury moonshine brings five hunnerd a bar'l!" His eyes, small and sullen, explored Sandra and her oversize man's garb. "Nuther female, huh? The wagon master, he's already got a pee-rade of 'em. Enough to reach halfway acrost the Pawnee country of Kansas! No wimmen for me!"

"That's what I said last night, and look at me now," Holeproof replied.

The whiskey freighter looked puzzled, then gave his attention again to the fire.

"We're goin' to have a time findin' a outfit that'll take ye, Miss Sandy," Holeproof said. "Now why don't ye act reasonable, and come along back with me? Gosh, I wouldn't go West for—"

He jerked erect as the wet air brought clear, sharp reports of gunfire. The whiskey freighter craned around again.

"There's yore chance, highpockets. They're holdin' target tryouts for the scoutin' line. Down on the flats by the river." The man's inflamed eyes went to the long rifle cradled across the front of Holeproof's saddle. "Though I don't reckon that smokepole of yore'n could nozzle a bullet the full length of it," he added contemptuously.

"Want to bet?" snapped Holeproof contemptuously.

Sandra was at his elbow.

"Let's go down there!" she urged.

"Ten to one yuh miss clean," the whiskey freighter sneered.

"I'll take five dollars worth of that, if ye can cover that much," challenged Holeproof.

The other man dug into a pocket and flashed a roll of greenbacks.

"Yuh're on," he grunted. "Yore five to my fifty."

Sandra started, and in a splatter of mud Holeproof followed her. When they reached the bottomlands under the bluff they saw a knot of armed men and headed for them.

"All right, boys, who's next?" called out a ruddy-cheeked man with a small square patch of white beard.

A long-faced individual with a wad of "chewing" bulging one cheek slouched up to the firing position, a stake driven into the sand. He raised his gun and aimed at an object about one hundred yards away, on the river bank.

"Goshamighty, a turkey shoot!" blurted Holeproof. "I shore could do with a drumstick or two!"

The head of a live turkey made a tiny target behind a sand mound.

The long-faced man's gun leaped and roared out a billow of blue smoke. The turkey's head bobbed as wet sand leaped a foot to the right of it.

"Reckon that gobbler'll die of old age," laughed one of the onlookers.

The long-faced man spat, muttered blasphemously, and wiped his sights with a horny hand. By now, the others were staring at the girl in man's clothing.

"Let the gal try, Cap Rountree!" one of them snickered.

"Who ever heard of a she-scout?" the ruddy-faced man with the square patch of beard said.

The long-faced man did not share in the general amusement.

"I'd feel a blame sight safer in the pit with the bird, when a woman starts a-shootin'!" he grumbled.

Sandra reached out and gripped the stock of Holeproof's Kentucky rifle.

"Let me try!" she pleaded. "It may give me the chance I need!"

"But this rifle, she hain't lady broke!" protested Holeproof.

Sandra tossed back her slicker and slid from Lady Belle. Holeproof's grasp on his weapon slackened and she dragged it from him. In a moment she was at the firing stake. The long octagon barrel of the gun was nearly as tall as the girl herself. Rountree, the wagon master, smiled broadly as she struggled to lift the butt to her shoulder.

"Reckon it won't do the turkey no harm," he decided.

Holeproof was down now and beside Sandra.

"Hold fine and trigger easy!" he cautioned.

The girl's cheek snuggled the stock. The muzzle wrote a small, wavering circle. She braced her left elbow against her side and squeezed the hair-fine trigger.

The long weapon belched thunderously. Sandra staggered back into Holeproof's arms as amazed yells rose from the other men. Holeproof stared across the top of the rain-

Sandra Lane

crinkly spun gold of the girl's hair, unbelievingly. All at once he whooped, leaped high and flung his hat into the air. For the turkey's head had gone down behind the sand mound, and it did not reappear. There was just a glimpse of a fluttering wing.

Sandra realized that the shot had been largely accidental. The sights had swayed into line at the exact instant of firing.

The wagon master's face went blank.

"I'm out a turkey," he said.

"But yuh're in a Injun scout!" gleefully yipped one of the contenders. "A gal scout!"

"It's the rules o' the shoot!" another one reminded him. "Yuh done promised to accept the best three. And nobody can beat *that* shootin'! Puttin' the bird down first crack!"

Holeproof blew smoke from the open breech, bit off a paper cartridge at the twisted end, and reloaded his gun. He was excited and lapsed into rhyme.

"I done wrong, comin' along," he told Rountree. "If the rule's gotta stick, I volunteer in her place, Cap."

"If you'd done shooting like that, I'd say yes."

"Huh, I fit from first call for volunteers to Appomattox! I reckin I can qualify!"

"Mighty cocksure, now that there's no more turkey, ain't yuh, feller?" said the long-faced man sarcastically.

HOLEPROOF'S lips clamped tightly as he went to the firing stake and thumbed back the hammer. Fifty yards out beyond the turkey pit a long-legged blue heron sailed down to a thin clump of reeds and settled in wading depth, its ridiculously thin body mirrored against the flat, unrippled water.

Holeproof's rifle stock went to his shoulder with familiar ease, right elbow projecting sharply, in the manner of a sharpshooter of the skirmish line. There was grace now in his ungainliness. The long gun seemed a part of him. His hold was steady, betraying no slightest movement to watching eyes.

Again the weapon boomed. The heron collapsed. For a moment it threshed brokenly in a small circle, then it floated inertly. A puff of feathers floated lightly away on the slow, muddy current.

The wagon master's lips puckered in a whistle.

"Glory be! What a pair!" He stared at them admiringly.

Holeproof was a little appalled at his own success. He had forgotten about his bet with the whiskey freighter until he heard the latter's raspy voice behind him.

"They got nary a outfit, Rountree, but the critters they rode here on!"

Holeproof turned.

"Reckon we can sort of afford what we need now," he declared. "Fork over that fifty, Snake Eyes!"

"But our bargain was about the target! Yuh made up yore own target! Dig up a fiver, highpockets. Yuh've lost!"

Holeproof handed his rifle to the girl.

"I'll pay ye with a bunch o' fives!" he gritted, knotting a fist menacingly.

Sandra grabbed him.

"Go get that turkey," she ordered.

CHAPTER III

Captain Bartow

THE shoot was over. And not many minutes later, Holeproof and Sandra were in the Rountree camp. The wagon master's wife, Polly, invited them to share breakfast with them and their two children, John and Ruth.

Cap Rountree's eyes twinkled.

"I knowed I could get that turkey back if I phrenigled around," he said. "Let's pick the bird while the coffee gets to boilin'."

Sandra made quick acquaintance with Polly Rountree, while the youngsters thrust wing feathers in their hair and whooped around the wagon, playing Indian. The mother watched them worriedly.

"They'll grow up into young savages, like as not," she complained. "Them missing their schooling was the one thing that almost held us back from migrating."

Holeproof smote a palm enthusiastically with a fist.

"Goshamighty, I got the idee! A perambulatin' schoolma'am!"

"A what?" Polly Rountree asked, puzzled.

"Miss Sandy, she can l'arn all the kids in the train! L'arn 'em on the go! And sort of ride herd on 'em, betwixt classes! Keep 'em out of mischief!"

"But," protested the girl, "all the education I had was at the district school at Ashridge!"

Rountree dismissed her argument with a fanning motion of one hand. His moon face beamed.

"A wagon train with a teacher, now there's style, folks! And don't go apologizing, Miss, for your humble knowledge. You know the three Rs, don't you? Well, Abe Lincoln learnt

his three Rs with a shovel for a slate."

"What's the three Rs?" clamored eight-year-old Johnny Rountree.

"Mought be ridin', rifle-shootin' and redskin-fightin'," his father told him.

"She can handle them subjicks also," Holeproof Hodkins confidently declared.

Sandra returned to her calico in the Rountree tent, and wrote that day to her people at Ashridge. She did not consider what the effect would be on them when she stated that a man named Hodkins had befriended her, and made possible her joining the wagon train. The letter went by post stage.

The days sped after that, for she was busy from dawn until dark. The sky cleared, the swollen streams dropped to normal level, and there came a memorable day when a troop of cavalry came from the West, to escort the emigrants through the hostile country. The clear, high notes of an army bugler blowing boots and saddles roused the camp one crisp, clear morning. The wagon lineup was formed. The westward trek began its slow crawl toward the Northwest wilderness.

With an outlandish battle-cry Swede leaped on Sandra's attacker

The wagon master's prairie schooner led the long serpentine out of the Independence meadows, with Polly Rountree driving. There was a stir along the column as a rider raced down out of the woodlands. The horse under him was lathered from terrific riding, and the man was livid with fury. He wore a Colt, holstered on a well weighted gun-belt. He

yelled loudly for the wagon master.

Rountree, on a piebald mare, heard the commotion and confronted the raging stranger.

"I'm Andy Lane!" the latter roared. "I've come for my gal, and for the hide o' the low-down polecat who run off with her!"

Rountree was calm, but his square patch of beard jutted with determination.

"Cool down, friend," he remonstrated gently. "It ain't like you think."

SANDRA'S father, beside himself from long worry and suspense, whipped out the Colt and brandished it in the wagon master's face.

"All I asked of you is where at is she!" he raged.

From the head of the column, where the civilian scouts rode with the small troop force, Holeproof Hodkins saw the gun threat. He prodded his leggy roan into a dash that fetched him up rearing between the two men.

"Put up that gun, or it won't be fun!" he ordered, swinging the muzzle of his long rifle toward Andrew Lane's middle.

"Keep out o' this, Hodkins," demanded Rountree, trying to circle around him.

"Hodkins!" whooped Sandra's father. "That's the name! Why, blast yer filthy soul, we'll settle it now!"

He was slamming down with the Colt when Sandra loomed suddenly from behind the tarpaulin draw of the Rountree covered wagon. It was too late for a warning cry, too late for anything but instant, active interference.

She leaped like a wildcat, hands extended before her in a clutching dive for the flashing six-gun. Her headlong impact was timed exactly to the report. It all happened so swiftly that even Rountree and other nearby onlookers did not know for a long instant what had happened. Not until the girl fell, under the forehoofs of the attacker's horse, a widening crimson streak under her right arm, did they know that she had received the bullet that had been intended for the lank, bearded scout.

But she had the Colt. And she was on her feet as Holeproof Hodkins, with a mighty oath, impulsive and unrhymed, whipped his rifle into a quick aim at Andrew Lane's breast. She thrust the six-gun up at her friend.

"Drop it!" she screamed.

Holeproof sensed the desperation in her cry. The rifle stock slid away from his shoulder, and his finger eased on the hair-fine trigger. His roan shied away.

Andrew Lane's fury went from him with a stricken groan as he saw the blood against the girl's side. Instantly he was off his horse and swept her into his arms.

"My Gawd, Sandy gal, what have I done!" he groaned.

A drum of hoofs, down along the wagon column, a crackling shout, and a cavalry officer with upraised saber burst upon the scene. He wore the shoulder bars of a captain on his blue uniform.

"Put that ruffian under arrest!" he rasped at Holeproof.

"B-but listen, Cap'n, it war a accident! He warn't fixin' to—"

"I gave you an order, Hodkins!" the officer reminded him tersely.

The habit of obedience was strong in the ex-soldier. He jabbed the rifle muzzle into the hollow of Andrew Lane's throat.

"March to the rear, Mister!" he commanded.

Rountree was the coolest head among them now. He was off his piebald mare. The wilting girl was supported between him and the distraught father.

"The thing now is to get this gal into the wagon and halt the train. Captain Bartow, please call your service doctor, quick!"

Captain Bartow! The name smote

Sandra's consciousness like another bullet. She straightened, her flashing eyes on the young officer's face. Young, and darkly handsome, he was a resplendent figure among those other uncouth, roughly garbed and whiskered civilians. In any other circumstances, he was the sort to cause the maidenly heart to skip a beat or two.

BUT that did not matter now. Sandra struggled free. She confronted him with a contempt that staggered him.

"Captain Bartow!" she cried. "Bruce Bartow! You're not fit to give orders. You're not fit to wear that fine uniform, while other men, better men—"

Rountree made an effort to quiet her. She threw off his touch violently.

"You're better at burying folks than guarding them, Captain Bartow!" she lashed out again. "Arrest, will you? Why didn't you make an arrest out there at Fort Bent? Why didn't you arrest my brother's murderer?"

Andrew Lane abruptly became the center of this passionate scene. He clasped his daugther frenziedly.

"Gal, what are you sayin'? Gawd in heaven, what is this about—about Bob?"

She laid a free arm around her father's bent shoulders.

"Go on home, Pa." She was suddenly contrite. Her mood changed as swiftly as the glinting light in her bright hair. "I didn't aim to tell. That's why I left, to keep it from you. But please don't tell Ma. Just you tell her I've gone to—to see Bob."

Pain ripped her bleeding side, and she rested her weight against her father's supporting arm.

"But you're leaving your gun with me, understand?" she panted. "A man with your temper shouldn't pack a gun."

"Gee willikins, speakin' of temper!" exploded Holeproof. "Sandy, yer pa, he's a dove of peace alongside—"

A faintness seized the girl and there was a concerted rush to keep her from falling.

"Hit for home, Pa," she said, her words trailing off weakly.

Polly Rountree was down from the high wagon seat now, and she swept the fumbling efforts of the men aside. Easing the swooning girl to the grass, she deftly ripped away the side of the calico dress. A swift inspection of the bullet rip in the smooth, milk-white skin, and Polly lifted her face piously toward the sky.

"We thank Thee, Father," she said, "for Thy divine mercy."

"And for a bad-aimed bullet and them good stout corset stays," Holeproof added practically.

Captain Bartow had not uttered a word to defend himself against the girl's withering denunciation. But his bronzed face had paled, and now he swung onto his horse and tore off for the doctor. Andrew Lane was even more stunned. Slowly he unbuckled his gun-belt and dropped it beside the Colt which lay close to Sandra's outstretched hand.

"What she said about my crazy-headed temper was plumb right," he said huskily. "From now on, Gawd help me, I won't ever put a gun in my hand."

Holeproof pushed his hands into his pockets, the long rifle in the crook of his right arm, and turned his back.

"I got my orders," he said loudly. "But shucks, I can't help it if my prisoner escapes and tails out for home, like he ought to. And knowin' I'll look out for Sandy like she was my little sister, whatever comes."

Andrew Lane, with dragging footsteps, went to his horse.

"'Tain't the first time a Lane woman has took up her men folks' quarrels," he said, addressing the scenery with the same vagueness as Holeproof's. "She's got spunk, Sandy has. I'm mighty proud of her, and now all I ask is that the Almighty makes a good liar out of me, so's I

can fool her ma about—about what's happened."

When Captain Bartow returned with the service doctor, Lane was gone. The doctor inspected Polly Rountree's bandages.

"Good as I could do. A good rest, good care, and she'll be none the worse for it."

So the Rountree expedition rolled on into the Kansas prairies. Sandra's abundant young strength rapidly returned, and the fame of the "six-gun schoolma'am" spread along the Oregon Trail, taking its place with other glamorous legends of famous pioneer exploits.

CHAPTER IV

Firewater

CAPTAIN BARTOW allowed Andrew Lane's "escape" to pass without comment or rebuke. But he showed no intention of so readily dismissing the girl's charges against himself, although Holeproof Hodkins had explained what he knew.

The young officer paused often beside the Rountree wagon.

"I want to straighten this affair out, just as soon as your patient is able," he told Polly Rountree.

"Oh, she's able enough," the wagon master's wife told him. "But she claims she don't owe an apology to nobody."

"I'm not asking for any apology," he stated stiffly. "Nor am I offering one."

When he was gone, Polly Rountree started to tell Sandra what had been said.

"I heard every word," the girl interrupted.

"Honey, I think you've got Captain Bartow sized up wrong," Polly said. "Why don't you talk with him?"

"Why?" Sandra demanded impatiently.

"There's a misunderstanding, somewhere."

"Clearing it up won't bring back Bob!"

"It might make you feel better inside," the older woman persuaded gently.

"I feel all right."

"My, ain't you the stubborn one! Why, any woman in this train would be flattered silly if she got half the attention that young man is trying to give you!"

"He'd better give his attention to a grazer on Antelope Creek who's name begins with C-a-r," said Sandra grimly.

Polly Rountree gave up. Then Holeproof took on the rôle of peacemaker.

"Cap'n Bartow, ye got him mighty fussed, Sandy," he told her one day. "He don't exackly deserve the rakin' over the coals ye gave him. He says—"

"Did he send you here?" the girl demanded.

"Waal," faltered the scout, "it warn't exackly a military order. But he sort of let on that his hide ain't thick as a buffalo's. I reckon he'd admire yer good opinion of him. I bet he never was drag-hauled thataway by no other woman. He—"

"Holeproof," Sandra broke in severely, "when this trip ends, I hope never to see Captain Bartow again. If he asked you to bring a message back from me, you can tell him that!"

The scout gravely rolled a chew over in his lean, whiskery cheek.

"Yer a spiteful little she-cat. That's what I'll tell him."

But Holeproof had little time to act as intermediary in the strange siege. For the wagons started the long ascent of the snow-capped Rockies, into the region of Arapahoes and the Cheyennes, and the price of survival was eternal vigilance. The wagons made a tight fighting circle at night camps, and Holeproof became gaunter than ever from long riding and short sleep. And other trouble that came

from having a whiskey freighter along.

The whiskey freighter's name was Sansavine. He was a sullen, unpopular man. A feud smoldered between him and Holeproof, for their turkey shoot bet had never been settled.

One day, on a stretch of rough going along a bouldery creek bed, the incessant jouncing of Sansavine's heavily loaded wagon sprung a leak in one of the liquor casks. His position was near the end of the column. He pulled out of line, disregarding Bartow's stern general order forbidding it, to repair the seeping loss.

ROUNDING a bend, the rest of the train soon lost sight of him.

For days now, redskin marauders had lurked in the wake of the wagons. They were small raiding parties, too small for bold, open attack, but they pounced on loot that was thrown from overloaded wagons as the climb toward the Continental Divide steepened.

Busy tightening the hoops on the leaking cask, Sansavine did not see the hostiles until he was surrounded. His first warning was the dreaded savage yell. Flinging himself behind the stout sides of his freighter, Sansavine opened fire on the low-riding braves.

Arrows volleyed into the wagon. One of Sansavine's horses, stung by a barbed point, made a crazed bolt that started the others. Their driver dropped his musket to seize the reins and the cask that he had been repairing thudded to the creek bed.

This circumstance saved Sansavine's life. With exultant cries, the Indians swarmed around the prize to satiate their thirst, and indulge in an orgy on firewater.

Holeproof was far out in the hills, on a far-flung scouting circle, when Sansavine's shots resounded faintly. Holeproof raced toward them. He saw the freighter sawing at the reins of his runaways. He closed in, grabbed a bit, and rescued the lurching wagon from ruin. And then they overtook the train.

With the danger passed, Holeproof turned on the scared freighter.

"Ye've done it, ye no-account welcher!" the scout charged sternly. "Here's where ye halt agin, and finish unloadin'!"

Sansavine glared.

"What fool gab is this, highpockets?" he retorted.

"Ye heerd me! Dump that booze!"

Sansavine cracked his long bullwhip viciously over the leader's ears.

"Keep clear or I'll cut yuh in half with the lash, yuh long-legged bushwhacker!"

Holeproof's retort was to whip his gun to a quick aim and fire. Liquor spouted from a bullethole in one of the barrels.

Sansavine uttered an outraged howl and pulled up. Cursing a blue streak, he frantically ripped off a piece of shirt sleeve and wadded it into the leak. Holeproof, with a baleful gleam in his eyes, wrested the paper twist of a fresh charge between his teeth and reloaded.

"I'll have yuh in irons at the fort!" stormed Sansavine. "For willful destruction of propitty."

"We're bustin' them bar'ls here on the rocks, ye ornery cuss!" Holeproof declared. "Or else I'm shootin' 'em fuller o' holes than a woodpeckered tree!"

The scout's shot brought troops from the head of the column. They came scurrying back hastily, at what they believed was an attack signal, and with Captain Bartow in the lead.

Sansavine blatted his complaint.

"He's sot on ruinin' me, on account of we had a falling out at Independençe," he finished.

The cavalry officer turned on Holeproof.

"Is this the truth, what he says?" he demanded sternly.

"Mostly," Holeproof agreed amiably. "Only he left out mention of

droppin' a cask back a ways, where he stopped. And a pack of Injuns is pollutin' theirselves on it now. Once they reelize that a wagonload of firewater is in this train, all hell can't keep 'em from swarmin' down on us. In big and thirsty numbers."

"The damage, it's done now," whined Sansavine.

"But it can be kee-rected," declared Holeproof. "When they foller ye up, and find the rest o' yore devil's load smashed to smithereens."

"Hodkins is right," Captain Bartow promptly decided. "In the interests of the safety of our entire party, I order you to do as he says, Sansavine."

THE whiskey freighter flapped his arms and raved profanely. Holeproof's long rifle, cradled in his arm, jarred out a thunderbolt that brought the contents spurting from another barrel.

"Goshamighty!" the scout exclaimed in mock surprise. "Danged if she didn't up and go off accidental!"

"I'll sue the guv'ment!" howled Sansavine.

Captain Bartow turned to his men.

"Unload that liquor and destroy it," he ordered. "If this man interferes, Hodkins, handle him in your own way. Let that be the end of it."

Holeproof saluted grinningly. And as the troopers set about their seizure, he lapsed into his anti-cussing formula.

"Whiskey, whiskey, bane of life, cause of trouble, source of strife; if I could half yer troubles tell, the wise would wish ye spilt in hell."

Sansavine jumped down from his wagon, his small eyes pinpoints of hate.

"I'll collect for this!" he fumed. "Out of your ugly hide!"

"And I'll collect that bet offen ye if it takes till doomsday."

But neither threat was fulfilled in the weary weeks during which the Rountree expedition snaked over the Rocky Divide and beyond. Providentially, they were spared serious Indian trouble. Except for short, sharp skirmishes with war parties, they traversed the land of Arapahoe and Cheyenne and penetrated the hunting grounds of the Sioux nation.

But the state of siege between Sandra Lane and Captain Bartow was unbroken, though the young officer found excuse to hold council often at the Rountree campfire. On such occasions, the girl also found excuse to withdraw and retire to the wagon.

By now Polly Rountree saw this silent, wordless duel in a new light. Coming to know Captain Bartow better, she decided he was attracted, rather than repelled, by Sandra's cold aloofness.

Or was Sandra aloof? More than once she had caught the girl following the captain's movements with unreadable eyes. One wakeful night, when a full moon turned the dusty wagon top to a silvery canopy, the older woman spoke up.

"I treated Pa like that once, when I had a mad on. Just like you treat the captain."

"No man means anything to me, Polly!" declared Sandra firmly.

"Yes, I said that, too. About Pa. But I just couldn't get him out of my mind."

A moment of abashed silence, then Sandra spoke quietly.

"Polly, I came West for something important, terribly important. He would only hinder me in doing it."

"Is hate that important, honey?" Polly asked.

"You don't understand."

"I understand more'n you think, Sandra. And let me tell you something. Captain Bartow, he ain't the kind to go on eatin' humble pie forever."

The next morning Bartow rode past the Rountree wagon and saw Sandra at the reins. He touched the brim of his service hat in the barest possible greeting. To his astonishment, the

girl responded with an indifferently spoken "Good morning."

Instantly his face was transformed into a smile of glad relief. He was fairly radiant. But he was wise enough not to press his advantage just then. With a gay wave of gauntletted hand, he dashed off.

CHAPTER V

Reception Committee

SLOWLY, like hard granite of the mighty mountains under the ceaseless onslaught of gentle rain and winds, Sandra's restraint diminished after that. Perhaps it was the springtime in this high, lovely country that helped to bring about the change. It was hard to carry hate when soul-stirring beauty spread out on every side.

The great ranges made one feel humble. The grandeur of the Rockies turned the soul worshipful. One night, inside the wagon circle, Captain Bartow saw Sandra looking out across a vast basin hemmed in by forest-clad peaks, lips slightly parted, enchanted by the virgin splendor.

He approached her quietly.

"Fort Bent is situated something like this," he said softly.

She turned slowly.

"And Antelope Creek?"

"That's beautiful, too."

"Beauty is lost on some folks. Such as a grazer whose name starts with C-a-r."

"We'll be at Fort Bent inside another month. You'll soon find how matters are there."

"I'll soon find the man who killed my brother," she pursued relentlessly.

"And then?"

"I have the Colt, Dad's Colt. When I meet Mister C-a-r, I'll use it." She meant it, too.

"There's a law against murder in Oregon Territory," he reminded.

"Why didn't you enforce it then?" she demanded. "After Bob was shot in the back?"

His shoulders lifted with a slow intake of breath, an effort to hold onto calm.

"That was slim evidence to go on. Just his letter that mentioned a visitor, and a threat. But please, Miss Lane, can't we be friends? Can't you relent, just a little, in your harsh opinion of me? And won't you rely on me to bring about justice, if it's humanly possible to do so?"

"Justice!" The old bitterness was in her voice. "Was there any mention of justice in those few lines you wrote on Bob's letter?"

"If what I wrote seemed cold and unsympathetic, it was because I was snowed under with work and responsibility for settlers who still lived. Would you have wanted wordy condolence from a stranger?"

She faced him squarely now, and they were very close, so close that the physical impact on him was as heady as strong wine. He had felt this sensation before, in a smaller way, that day that she had tongue-lashed him at Independence.

But it was almost overpowering now. They were alone, on top of the world, surrounded by solitude, as the first man and the first woman must have stood. All at once he knew that he wanted this glowing, willful girl more than he had ever wanted anything else in all his life.

He was in the act of reaching out, claiming her, of throwing away all restraint in a joy-crazed declaration, when her words, sharp as ice and as cold, pierced him to the core of his hotly pulsing heart.

"Captain Bartow, you know who murdered my brother!"

It was like a blow. He took it unflinchingly.

"Personally, I have a suspicion," he slowly admitted. "Officially, I cannot voice that suspicion until—"

Her voice rose, almost to an ear-splitting shrillness.

"Then you are protecting that murderer!"

IF THE mountains had fallen, plunging him into a bottomless abyss, Bartow could not have been more shaken. And while he clutched for a hold on the slipping universe, she denied him expression of that worshipful devotion she had aroused, by fleeing abruptly to the wagon.

Captain Bartow might have been consoled had he known that she did not sleep until dawn dimmed the stars. . . .

Outside the army post at Fort Bent a mushroom town had sprung up. It was a wild and unruly settlement. Hard characters from throughout the

Northwest gathered there to revel, and to form bold conspiracies aimed toward domination of the new frontier.

The grazers wanted the land for open, unrestricted range. And some among them were unscrupulous enough to assert their ambitions with lawless force. The settlers came in quest of independence and security on free new soil, to contribute its riches to the growing nation.

The government at Washington had encouraged such use of the land, but as yet had taken no precautionary steps to avert the inevitable clash of opposing factions. The law of the land was military. The involved situation was a staggering burden on the army, whose primary purpose there was to defend the frontier, and to safeguard its citizenry.

Bartow's command, giving its strength to escorting wagon trains and to Indian warfare on many fronts, was an insufficient force to cope with town trouble. Thus, open shootings were commonplace, crooked gambling flourished, and villainy was there in many forms. The only restriction found possible to the small but valiant garrison in governing liquor traffic was to prevent its sale to Indians. That alone was a gigantic task, in the face of greedy and unscrupulous traders.

So saloons and slab-board dens known as dancehalls were plentiful. Among these was the "Bucket of Blood."

The resort had a plank bar, supported on empty kegs. Behind it tapped barrels rested on chocks, from which a scraggly, one-eyed bartender drew and served. Whiskey sold for one dollar a drink.

Early one uproarious night, the one-eyed bartender tilted one of the kegs and drew a final trickle from it, passing the murky glass to a big, loud man with a grizzle of sandy beard and a flattened, bent nose.

"That's the last of it, Bick," he said.

The customer held the glass up against the light, snarled an oath, and flung the contents to the floor.

"The comforts of civilization are mighty slow in gettin' to Fort Bent!" he complained. "A man ought to make quicker money in likker here than in cattle! I got in the wrong business!"

"Sansavine's due in coupla weeks, mebbe less," the bartender offered. "Him and the train Bartow's bringing, they've reached the Snake. A rider come through sayin'—"

"More settlers!" Bick Carmody blasted. "What's the guv'ment up to, anyhow? Promisin' them free plow land, and guarantecin' us grazers free range at the same time?"

"Bartow, he's been doin' his dog-gondest for a long time to get things straightened out at Washington, I'm told."

"Damn Bartow! I can take care of my own affairs."

"Shore. Yuh're a big man around here, Bick. Yuh jest about run this town. If yuh'd only pull a few political strings—"

BICK CARMODY hitched up his gun-belt, weighted low against his right thigh by a holstered Colt. There was an ugly leer in his slanting, lynxlike eyes.

"Pullin' a trigger is heaps simpler," he declared. "The only law in this country is what a man makes for hisself. The only title is what he takes and holds, I say. So that new batch of wagons is due soon, huh? Be a good idea for the town to arrange a reception."

"With you as the reception committee?"

"That's right!" Bick Carmody grinned. The bartender's flattery instilled him with an idea. "Yes, sir, I think I'll talk that over with the boys right now."

He left the bar and swaggered into a back room. He flung himself into an empty chair at a round poker table, where five other men sat. They were garbed much as he, in chaps and spurred boots. A hawk-nosed man had the cards.

"Hold up the deal, there, Derry," Carmody ordered brusquely. "Poke out yore ears, gents, and listen to what I got to say."

The six of them leaned in close converse, the noise of the place building a wall around them. Bick Carmody did most of the talking. Whatever the others thought, none voiced objection.

"And as a final touch," Carmody concluded, "we gotta sidetrack that jigger Sansavine. We'll corner his load for ourselves, so's we won't dry up and blow away, like I feel now."

This proposal met with enthusiasm. Bick Carmody left, puffed with self-importance. But ten days later, a cavalryman reached Fort Bent with the news that the Rountree wagon train was near. And he brought with him the report of Sansavine's loss. When this news was brought to the Bucket of Blood by the advance rider, Carmody was furious.

"Who does that young squirt Bartow think he is?" he whooped. "Ain't he got no consideration for a citizen's rights?"

"He shore ain't worried about a citizen's thirst," mourned Derry.

"It ain't him altogether," the trooper told them. "It was a long-legged Missourian scout named Hodkins that ordered Sansavine to dump his load."

"Hodkins, huh?" bellowed Carmody. "Jest remember that name, boys! When this jasper Hodkins hits Fort Bent, we'll give him a special welcome!"

[*Turn Page*]

The long vigilance and incessant rigors of the trail were over as the Rountree expedition entered the rolling valley of the Snake River and rolled along a well defined route. The country was being checkerboarded with fields already. Here and there along the rich bottomlands were the green squares of first plantings of grain and potatoes, corn and beans. The hungry immigrants bought fresh foodstuffs, and a few wagons dropped out of the column to stake out farmlands for themselves, here where they had the assurance of neighbors and a comparative security from marauding Indians.

The rest moved on to the fort.

The adventure of migration had been kind to Sandra Lane. She had thrived under conditions that had been a hardship to some of the other women. She exercised undisputed authority over the children, who were awed by the reputation that had clung to her since that day of the turkey shoot.

She was still the "six-gun schoolma'am" to the adult members of the train.

SHE had found physical well-being, but happiness had eluded her. She experienced none of that glad anticipation of the others, who had come to establish homes. Her errand was a far different one. It was an errand of death; of hatred and vengeance masked under the guise of pride and family honor.

That tumultuous experience with Captain Bartow was an ugly spectre in her memory. She bolstered up her self-justification that continually crumbled in the light of more reasonable reflection.

She was beginning now to understand the harassments of his duties, the many claims made upon him, as the journey neared its end.

She was sorry, but womanlike avoided the humbling moment of telling him so.

CHAPTER VI

Books and Bullets

ONE morning, when restlessness overwhelmed Sandra, she rode with Hodkins to the head of the train. The Colt hung from its gun-belt, looped to Lady Belle's saddle.

She was surprised when Captain Bartow galloped up beside them. He was leaner than when she had seen him last, almost haggard. Her heart leaped at the sight of him, and her eyes sought his own which were directed toward her, but seemed to be looking over her head, somewhere beyond.

"The settlers," he said in an impersonally brisk tone, "are asking for a schoolhouse here in the valley. I have been asked to put their request before you, as the one best qualified to take charge of it."

His eyes dropped to the gun. He added one thing more, a comment that came from himself. "Books, not bullets, is what they want."

"Ye can teach folks with both," Holeproof observed.

"With a school here, the country would develop faster," was the captain's comment.

"I'm going on to Fort Bent," Sandra said. "To Antelope Creek."

"It's wild country," he commented.

"It can be tamed," she told him sharply.

Holeproof dug a spur into the roan.

"Excuse me, folks," he said, spurting off on some imaginary duty.

That left them together. No use trying to keep up this pretense of formality now. They both knew it. Bartow braced himself with resolve.

"Sandra Lane," he said. "I want to ask you a question, and I want you to consider it fairly and give me a promise, now."

She felt fluttery at anticipation of what he was going to ask. She could hardly conceal her eagerness. And

then his voice became crisp again, without any undertone of warmth or personal desire.

"It is this," he said. "Hand me that gun. In return for that I give you my solemn promise that your brother's killer will be hunted and punished."

"Then you *do* know?" she cried. "You've known all along?"

"I felt that the time would come when I would know. I shall now go about finding out."

Her gray-green eyes locked the message that her heart longed to give.

"When you arrest Bob's murderer, then it will be time to bargain, not now," she said firmly.

He reached out an imploring hand.

"Are you still clinging to that preposterous idea that I'm trying to protect somebody?"

"Aren't you?"

"Yes!" he declared spiritedly. "You! I want to protect you against yourself, you foolish girl!" And then he kneed his horse over close to hers and touched her arm. "For the love of Heaven, do we have to keep this up forever? Can't you see, Sandra, dear, that I want to protect you always? That I want—"

"You want this gun," she interrupted. "Isn't that it?"

His ardor went as swiftly as it had come. He spoke hoarsely, angrily, now.

"How such a girl as you can have any good influence over children is beyond me! The settlers must be blind! 'Six-Gun Schoolma'am!' The day will come when that title will taunt you, when you'll do anything in your power to change it! God help you, then, for I shan't be able to help! And now, good-by!"

He rode away furiously. The warmth of his hand was still in the girl's arm. She felt suddenly desolate, horribly alone. She wanted to spur after him, to fling herself on him, to recall her biting words.

That evening Bartow summoned Holeproof Hodkins to his tent.

"Tomorrow," he began, "we shall reach the fort."

"And my job, it'll be over," mourned Holeproof.

"No! It will be barely begun! Listen, Hodkins, I want you to go on ahead, tonight! There's a man in the settlement named Carmody — Bick Carmody. I want you to get him out of town before the wagons arrive."

"How, Cap'n?"

"Any way you can contrive. He's a dangerous customer. He'll shoot at the smallest excuse."

"S'pose I shoot first?" suggested Holeproof.

"No, that won't do. The law will take care of Carmody. When I've got the facts to go on."

Holeproof screwed up one eye shrewdly and raked his black beard with his fingers.

"Is this here," he asked quietly, "a military order, Cap'n?"

Bartow was not prepared for that.

"Why do you ask me that?" he countered with a frown.

"I figgered it warn't. Me, I'd of handled this here situation sort of different, if yuh don't mind me sayin' so."

"What do you mean?"

HOLEPROOF considered ponderously before he answered.

"Well, now, mebbe I'm a insubordinate so-and-so for pokin' my nose into this, Cap'n. But I jest can't keep from sayin' that if I had yer looks, and my inclinations, I'd go right over to the Rountree wagon now. Yes, sir, I'd drag that mule-headed gal out by the—by whatever Gawd gave her that I could get hold of—and I'd dust her good and plenty. And then, when I'd got done, I'd wrap my arms around her tight and I'd say purty things in her ear, and I'd keep on sayin' 'em till I had her bawlin' on my shoulder. That's what *I'd* do."

Holeproof was skating on thin ice and he knew it. For quite a long moment, how Bartow intended to re-

spond to his impertinence was in the ticklish balance.

"And what," the captain finally asked, "would you do next?"

"Well, sir, I'd ram that hogleg Colt she's got down into a prairie dog hole so far she never would find it. But jest to play double safe, I'll go on in to the post. Jest leave Mr. Carmody ter me, Cap'n."

Bartow was still scowling, but in deep thought rather than in disapproval. Holeproof started out, ducking his lean length under the tent flap when the officer stopped him.

"Wait, Hodkins!" he called.

Holeproof turned. Maybe it was coming now, the hide-loosening he half expected for speaking out his mind. Captain Bartow's face was still severe.

"Hodkins," he declared, "as your commanding officer, I regret to say that you are about the worst example of a soldier I have ever known."

Holeproof hung his head guiltily. Then he jerked it up as Bartow seized his hand, and when he faced him now, the captain was grinning as he hadn't for days.

"You're a bad soldier, Hodkins. But you're a splendid friend. I shan't ever forget."

Holeproof grinned back at him.

"And don't forget what I said, neither, Cap'n," he said. "Now for this jigger Carmody."

Bartow sobered.

"What I ask is not for myself," he said.

"I realize that. It's for somebody we both think a heap of, in our diff'rent ways. I shore wish ye a plenty of luck, Cap'n, and that ye stay nerved up to go through with it. Women folks, they need a mite of joltin' up, sometimes."

THE Rountree wagon was dark when Captain Bartow reached it. He suddenly felt a small-boy foolishness. Holeproof's advice had sounded convincingly fine when it had been uttered, but now the captain's confidence in it faded.

The night was clear and fine, a half-moon competing with the brightness of the western skies. The air was balmy with late summer. It was mating season in the wilderness, which still crowded close in around the valley of the Snake. Down in the thickets along the river, bull elk were rubbing the velvet from their spreading antlers, preparing for the age-old conquests of their kind. The challenging call of one magnificent male floated up from their stamping grounds.

Bartow circled the wagon uncertainly. All at once he was aware of a small sound inside. He halted, and listened for an intent moment before he identified the sound. It was muffled, stricken, sobbing. The rôle of eavesdropper rankled him. But his concern was greater than his pride, so he stepped closer. Polly Rountree's consoling voice, a hushed whisper, came to his ears.

"It ain't what he said that's a-hurting you, honey. It's what you said to him."

There was a break in the sobbing.

"It would be so much—so much easier, Polly, if I had never seen him, if we had never met."

"You love him, don't you?"

There was a muffled answer, so low that Bartow, to his intense chagrin, could not catch it.

What he had come to do was mountingly difficult now. Just how should he go about the roughly tender undertaking that Holeproof had advised? The technique of such love-making was a mystery to Bartow. How could a man trounce the girl he adored when she was already in tears?

But he would feel doubly ridiculous to turn back now. So he brashly approached the wagon.

"Sandra!" he called out.

Polly Rountree's head appeared at the drawn tarp over the tailgate. Bartow went to her.

"Captain, you!" she exclaimed.

"Goodness me, what on earth's come over young folks nowadays! Her cryin' her eyes out, you mooning around like—"

"Tell her," Bartow said, "that I must speak to her, now."

That was Holeproof's recipe for a romantic offensive. But the time was badly chosen. A tear-streaked damsel of Sandra's pride was not likely to heed such a summons.

Polly Rountree projected her head farther. Her hair was tightly drawn in paper curlers. She was not a very impressive-looking oracle.

"Just you skitter back to bed, Captain!" she whispered secretively. "You leave her to me! This is no hour for—"

Excited voices, up toward the troop camp, caused her to chop off the admonition. Bartow looked past the wagon. A man, carrying a lantern, was hastening toward his tent, followed by a knot of others.

HE WAS suddenly the officer, the watchful guardian of these wagonfolks. He was even glad for an excuse to retreat.

He did not know, as he took his hasty departure, that Sandra was sitting bolt upright, her ear fairly glued to the tarp wall of the covered wagon, her heart beating like an Indian drum. Nor did he know that his interrupted courting had really accomplished as much as it had. For Sandra slept that night, and for the first time in many nights her sleep was garlanded with rapturous dreams.

He reached the men at his tent flaps.

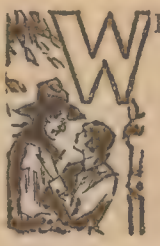
"There's trouble brewing in the settlement, Cap'n!" announced the man with the lantern. "The grazers, they're on a rampage! There's a big, tough 'un named Carmody at the bottom of it! He—"

"He'll be taken care of," Bartow promptly assured the man.

He was glad he could tell them that in all confidence. And he was even more glad that Holeproof's mission was now something more than a private and personal precaution.

CHAPTER VII

Nervy Play



WHEN Holeproof reached the settlement, he put the roan up at a teeming public corral and straggled up the noisy street, lugging his long rifle. After months in the wilderness, he found strange stimulation in the crowd.

Most of them were armed, like himself. And nowhere in all the world was there a stranger conglomeration of humanity. Grazers and settlers, troops from the fort, trappers and speculators, freighters and all the predatory hell-fry that swarmed in the wake of a land rush.

The Bucket of Blood was a magnet that drew them, and Holeproof jostled past the crowded entrance. At the rough bar, the one-eyed man was serving a savory concoction under a sign that said:

COFFEE & SLUMGULLION, $1

Holeproof elbowed in.

"Happen to know a party named Carmody?" he asked.

The one good eye of the barman flicked to a burly man who was noisily drinking a cup of hot coffee.

"Who wants to know?" grunted the coffee drinker.

Holeproof eyed without favor the smudgly beard and flattened nose, and the low-hung six-gun. Holeproof firmly believed in direct methods, in love or war.

"If yer him," he said distinctly enough for the crowd around them to hear, "clear out. Travel for yer health, Mister. Don't bother to ask me what for and why so. Jest get!"

The big man's eyes bulged. He banged the coffee cup on the bar. With ominous thoroughness he rolled

a sleeve up over a hairy forearm. He knocked the crowd away with a backhanded sweep.

"Give me elbow room," he demanded.

But Holeproof was ready for him. He ducked the first terrific swing as he was leaning his long rifle against the bar. He came in under with a lightning bolt of a right to Carmody's stomach, and a left that clopped under his ear.

It was like hitting a sand breastwork. Carmody roared like a maddened bull and rushed. Holeproof danced back, just as some man in the crowd thrust out a foot and tripped him backward.

"No, Derry, don't spile the fun!" he heard a yell as he went crashing down.

Carmody pounced on the fallen Holeproof with fists like sledge-hammers, but the wiry scout snaked from under, slipped out of a hammerlock and went for the stomach again the instant he was up. He sunk a good one under the ribs.

With a sickish sound, Carmody hit the bar and rebounded. He was gusting grunty breaths. Holeproof was unflurried, except for a bleeding cut that dripped red into his black whiskers.

"Corner him agin the bar, Bick!" came a shout of advice.

Carmody started, crouching low now to protect his middle. Somebody pushed Holeproof from behind, jolting him off-balance and they tangled furiously. Holeproof's bony fists drummed for that vulnerable section under his antagonist's ribs, circling, and with a great effort flung the heavier man to the bar again. Carmody grabbed the long rifle, raised it and swung, but Holeproof danced away from the murderous downsweep of his gunstock, just as the man called Vollick, who had shoved him, began another push.

The blow crashed on Vollick's skull instead of on Holeproof's. He kissed the floor, in the center of a wide splatter of blood.

Holeproof took advantage of the hushed pause to wrench his rifle out of Carmody's hands. He got the six-gun, too, and jabbed it with all his force into that fatty region where his fists had drummed.

CARMODY bowed forward with a blatted cry. Holeproof got a twist hold at his shirt collar in back, along with some hair, and the crowd parted as he made for the street.

At the edge of the sidewalk he kicked his squealing victim bodily out into the dust and brandished the captured six-gun.

"Go like the deuce, before I cut loose!" he yelled.

Carmody pulled himself up on a stirrup leather, clambered into saddle and departed in mill tails of dust. Holeproof hastened back inside. The dead Vollick was being lifted onto the bar. The long rifle was on the bar, too, the blood-smeared stock shattered.

A hand clapped on his shoulder as he ruefully inspected it.

"That was the nerviest work I ever seen!" came an enthusiastic voice. "Yuh can count on us, Marshal!"

Holeproof whirled. "Marshal?" he parroted.

"Soldier here says yuh came from Bartow. About time he sent somebody to clean up the settlement. Anybody who starts in by lickin' Bick Carmody, he's got our support, us decent citizens."

"You bet!" cheered another.

For the first time since it had started, Holeproof felt weak in the knees. He leaned against the bar and spun a silver dollar on it.

"Whatever slumgullion is," he said weakly, "give me some."

The one-eyed bartender was playing in with a winner. He shoved the dollar back.

"It's on the house, Marshal," he said. "Jest wish I could offer yuh some-

thing stronger. But I can't, with every bar'l in the place rattly dry."

"Coffee's strong enough!" breathed Holeproof.

Some men were sliding the dead Vollick onto a blanket and they were doing it moodily, with hostile, furtive glances at the scout.

"Ain't noticed yuh producin' no authority, and besides the army ain't got no authority off the reservation to make you a peace officer," one of them was bold enough to say. "Don't try arrestin' anybody."

"He ain't got anything to arrest Bick for," chimed in one of his companions. "This here killin' of Vollick was a unavoidable accident."

"Is that so?" cried Holeproof. "Well, next time I meet up with Carmody, I'll arrest him. For bustin' my rifle stock!"

The crowd whooped their appreciation and Vollick was lugged off. Holeproof strutted through the settlement that night, the center of attraction, a hero with the better element, but still dazed from the honor that had so suddenly made him an official dignitary.

The next afternoon, the Rountree expedition made camp in the flats between the fort and the settlement and new, rejoiceful faces appeared on the streets. One of the first to appear was Sansavine, but he was not rejoiceful. He came directly to the Bucket of Blood and he glowered at the one-eyed bartender.

"What's this about that backwoods scout paradin' hisself as town marshal?" he demanded.

A man looked out from the smoke-hazed doorway of a back room. He was one of Carmody's cronies, one of those who had carried out Vollick.

"Come back here, Sansavine!" he called out.

THE whiskey freighter slouched back and saw a short-handed poker game.

"We're hopin' yuh was smart enough to stash away a bottle or two," the man who had summoned him said eagerly.

"Hell and damnation!" Sansavine yapped. "I never even got a drink for myownself! But I'll sue the guv'ment and hang Bartow's hide on the fence, yuh'll see!"

He flung himself in an unoccupied chair.

"Bick Carmody's got a proposition that'll interest you, Sansavine," the man who was dealing said.

"I got something that'll interest Bick," Sansavine said confidently.

"Yeah? Let's hear it."

Sansavine leaned forward, his narrow eyes like a ferret's.

"Way I learn things," he said huskily, "is by keepin' my mouth shut and my ears open. But I'll say this much. There's a gal with them immigrants named Lane and she's come to find out what happened to her brother, who met up with a sad accident last winter on Antelope Creek."

The dealer looked around at the intent ring of faces.

"She's a good-lookin' redhead. She packs a Colt, and they call her the Six-Gun Schoolma'am," Sansavine added. "Deal me in, Derry."

Derry resumed dealing.

"One hand around, boys," he said. "Then we better go locate Bick. . . ."

Sandra Lane did not join the celebration at the wagon camp. She rode Lady Belle toward the fort, and on a south slope where summer grass rippled in the breeze she found the stark, whitewashed headboards that marked the military cemetery.

On one marker was carved:

ROBERT LANE, CIVILIAN

She dismounted and knelt beside the little mound, bowed and uttered a silent prayer. Her heart was flooded with poignant memories, which in a moment were interrupted by horse sounds. She rose and saw Captain Bartow coming from the direction of the low-roofed barracks that commanded the hilltop.

He alighted at respectful distance from the graves and came to her, reverently baring his head. He was newly-shaven, in a fresh uniform, and there was gentle sympathy on his handsome face until he saw the Colt belted to her slender waist.

"If you'll come with me, up to the fort," he suggested, "I'll turn over to you the personal things that were his."

Instantly the old antagonism stiffened her. In her dreams, she could embrace the image of this man, could yield completely and joyously. But now—

"Keep them," she said coldly. "Until I come back from Antelope Creek."

"You're not going to Antelope Creek." He flung his hat to the grass and confronted her and captured her unwilling hands. "You have no need to go, my dear. Are you forgetting my promise?"

Her gray-blue eyes were inflexible.

"I'm not forgetting the promise I made to myself." She tried to free her hands. "Why must we go through all this again?"

"Because I love you."

She faltered, ever so slightly. He drew her toward him.

"Sandy, sweetheart," he breathed. "I love you, I want you."

His breath was on her cheek. One arm was encircling her. She was almost responding now.

"I came last night to tell you, dearest. I heard you crying. I wanted you in my arms. I always shall want you—"

HE HAD drawn her against him. She felt the warm touch of his lips. Her blood raced uncontrollably. It seemed that every hour of her life had been a river, sometimes placid, sometimes turbulent, that had flowed toward this sea of rapture.

And then, accident though it was, his hand about her waist touched the gun and she sprang from him, thrusting stiffened arms to widen the distance. Taunted beyond control, he surged forward and embraced her powerfully, smothered her with kisses from brow to lips and to her smooth, pulsating throat, murmuring his love. But she fought him and twisted free.

"Love can't bring him back," she said defiantly.

"Nor can hate." He tried to cling to her hand, but she slipped it out of his grasp.

"I'm sorry, Bruce," she said firmly. "It can never be, like this. Not so long as Bob's murderer lives."

"You are a proud little fool!" he said, angrily.

"I have the right to my pride, and the right to fight for it," she defied, spiritedly.

He had lost her again. She was in saddle, headed toward the settlement. The curve of the hilltop came between them. Nothing ahead now but the grim task of vengeance. She had come too far to abandon that task now.

She reached the narrow, dusty street flanked by the rough buildings and their crude signs, oblivious of stares and murmurs of admiration from the sidewalks. In front of the Bucket of Blood she saw Holeproof's tall roan, tied at the hitch-rack.

What manner of resort this was she did not know, for she was ignorant of Western ways. But here, among these swarming strangers, was her trusted friend. She swung down, tied Lady Belle beside the roan, and went inside. She could handle Holeproof. She could draw out of him the information she wanted—the route to Antelope Creek.

A man jostled her and caught her by the arm. She jerked away, and turned indignantly. He was a young, rawboned giant with a sun-yellowed mop of hair that reached to the collar of his fringed buckskin jacket.

"Hullo, sis!" he chuckled, reaching for her again. He got his huge arm around her. "We dance, huh?"

She staggered him with a slap that left the imprint of her hand on his

cheek. He rubbed it ruefully, still grinning and made another dive for her. She whipped out the Colt and he stopped short, staring like a bewildered, overgrown pup.

"You no lak me, huh? Look, I be no piker!"

He pulled a money pouch from inside his jacket and dangled it persuasively. They were the center of attention in the jammed place by now.

"She got yuh buffaloed, Swede?" somebody yipped.

He dropped the pouch back against his chest and started for Sandra again. She was hemmed in. There was no way of retreat.

"Stop!" the girl cried. "If you come a step closer, I'll let you have it!"

He circled playfully, as though this were some new game that he did not understand. His huge hands were spread, ready for a grab at the weapon. Braced and ready, Sandra knew she could not shoot; nor could she let herself come within that bearlike embrace.

Back in the crowd was a sudden stir. The close-packed onlookers separated to a buffeting commotion. Holeproof, towering above bobbing heads, hurled himself through and between the pair. He sent the man back against the tight-packed spectators with a jolt from the heel of his hand against the jaw that erased the Swede's foolish grin.

HE WAS in front of Sandra, who went limp with relief. But the big blond man came at him now.

"You take my girl, huh?" he roared. "I show you!"

"She don't belong here, ye knothead!" Holeproof cried. He reached back of him, shooing Sandra toward the street.

"Get!" he said. "Skedaddle!"

"Don't let the marshal spile yore fun, Swede!" shouted a grazer back in the crowd. "Take him on!"

"You bet, I take him apart!" was the yelled answer.

Three soldiers, members of the wagon train escort, struggling through the circle, put themselves in front of the oncoming Swede.

"They're wagon folks!" one of them sang out. "Him and the girl! Don't be a fool!"

Holeproof took advantage of the interruption to force an opening through the pack of humanity and hustle the girl to the sidewalk.

"Goshamighty, ain't I got troubles enough keepin' law and order?" he gasped. "What in all get-out are ye doin' here, Sandy?"

"I—I came to find the way to Antelope Creek!" she panted weakly.

"Waal, this ain't the way, and it's no place to stay!" Holeproof stormed. "Don't let me catch ye comin' back, or I'll dust ye off like a flour sack!"

When Holeproof talked rhyme, it was time to mind. Meekly she went to Lady Belle, untied her and got to saddle. It was late now. Tomorrow would be the day.

It was dark when Sandra got back to the wagon camp. She did not join the campfire circle, but went directly to her bed in the Rountree wagon.

CHAPTER VIII

Vengeance Trail

POSSIBLY the episode at the Bucket of Blood might have had no more serious aftermath than to delay Sandra in her quest. But the immigrants were a righteous lot. Next morning, as the girl busied herself at the breakfast fire, Rountree came to her, his honest, ruddy face puckered with worry.

"I don't hanker to tell yuh, gal," he said hesitantly, "but there's wicked gossipin' on the loose. Folks are sayin' that—that yuh ain't a fitten one to trust their young 'uns with no more. A schoolma'am's got to be careful of her behavior, as yuh should know.

When she gets mixed up in a saloon brawl—"

Sandra said good-by to the Rountrees that morning, and thanked them for all their kindness. At the town corral, a swamper directed her to the trail that led to Antelope Creek, ten miles north of the settlement.

"It brings yuh out at Bick Carmody's ranch, Miss," he said.

Sandra was stunned by the suddenness of what the man said. That name "Carmody" exploded in her brain like the fiery ball at the end of a rocket's flight. CAR-mody! Her pulse pounded so that she had to force her voice to casual steadiness.

"What sort of man is this Carmody?" she asked.

The swamper shifted a tobacco quid to the opposite cheek, squinting at the girl.

"A real good man," he observed dryly. "That is, to keep away from. Specially since that town marshal stampeded him out of town, and prob'ly bent his nose at a new angle."

That was more news. But not just what she wanted to know.

"How will I know him?" she said hastily.

"Bick? Well, Miss, he ain't no beauty specimen, with them hedgehog whiskers and loud manners of his'n."

"Has he a family?" she asked as an afterthought.

"Ain't no visible evidence of such."

She went, then, with the swamper still squinting after her wonderingly, shaking his head.

The Antelope Creek trail was well defined across the rolling country. Lady Belle followed it without reining, for there were fresh hoof tracks to follow. But now a strange reluctance seized the girl. The vengeance that had sustained her for so long departed, leaving her physically and spiritually exhausted.

She refused to admit it to herself, but deep down inside her soul she knew, after that experience with the amorous young giant at the Bucket of Blood, that she could not deliberately gun any man. She was a Lane still, but first of all a woman, with a woman's compassion, and her abhorrence of bloodshed was stronger than her sense of justice.

But she could not turn back now. Her pride would not allow that. Northward she rode, across a mesa where scattered bands of cattle grazed, over a jackpine ridge, then sharply down a zigzag descent to a small, fertile valley where a creek meandered.

She saw, as she descended, the low half-circle of a beaver dam with a shallow pond above it, and out of a grove of bright-leaved birches smoke rose from a slab-roofed ranchhouse. The meadow around the beaver dam was enclosed in a snake fence of split logs. The trail straightened out and took to the crest of the dam, past a barn and shed and holding corral, straight toward the house.

There were horses in the corral and saddles on a bark-peeled tie-rail, with blankets drying across them in the warm sun. And as she neared the house, a man stepped out of an open doorway onto the porch, and leaned one hand languidly against a rustic upright, watching her slow approach. He was smooth-faced, hawk-nosed and had a gambler's blank, unresponsive countenance.

THE girl reined up beside the split log steps. She was breathing as though from sharp exertion.

"Carmody," she demanded huskily. "Where is he?"

The hawk-nosed Derry, though Sandra did not then know his name, peeled a thin shred of bark from the log upright and thrust an end of it between his teeth. His calculating eyes studied the girl carefully, and lingered on the Colt.

"Who sent yuh?" he asked idly. "Bartow?"

"I'll do the talking with Carmody," she said coldly.

Derry scratched his back against the upright.

"Better light and set then, Ma'am. Bick, he's gatherin' up a bunch o' beef to drive in to the fort."

He removed the shred of bark from his mouth and indicated a bench on the porch.

"My business," Sandra retorted, "is more important than meat for soldiers. I'd be obliged if you took me to Carmody."

Derry looked at her from under his brows.

"I'd like to judge on that before we started," he drawled. "Jest what is yore business with Bick?"

It would not help matters to say that she had come to put a bullet through Bick Carmody. Sandra hesitated before answering. She was aware of small beads of moisture on her brow. Her hand that held the reins was clammy. Though the sun mantled her shoulders, her flesh was prickly cold.

"Suppose it's about cattle?" she finally said.

Derry seemed faintly amused.

"Yuh just remarked," he pointed out, "that it was more important than that. Than meat."

A floor board creaked inside the shadowy house. Sandra, suddenly tense, flicked a startled gaze to the doorway. The man she had come for stood there. The swamper's description had been perfect. Derry shifted behind the thick upright, so that it shielded him partly from the armed visitor.

Carmody's lynx stare was on the girl.

"What's the sense in all this palaver!" he rumbled. "Let her have her say, Derry. It's got to come."

He was unarmed. That was the first thing that Sandra noticed. But Derry was not. She could see his elbow projecting, his hand near the butt of his belt holster. He was waiting there, like a coiled rattler. He could whip out his six-gun at her first threatening move.

"Bob Lane was my brother," she said. Her voice was even now, sharp and cold as ice. "You shot him in the back."

"As a gen'ral rule," spoke up Derry, "statements such as that need to be accompanied by proof."

"That's correct," chimed in Carmody. "And here's something else. Soon as the six months was up, Derry here filed on his half section. Him and me are range pardners now."

The rapid, muffled thud of hoofs, like the magnified thumping of the girl's heart, came from the direction of the dam. Derry jerked around. Sandra saw his six-gun, steadied against the upright. She sent a swift glance across her shoulder, saw a tall roan speeding toward them. Standing in stirrups, his long, lean body slanted forward, was Holeproof Hodkins.

"Hold on, ever'body," he shouted. "Goshamighty, Sandy, don't—"

Stars Fall on Texas When Kathy Merril Meets Her Gunslinger Sweetheart in

ROMANCE RIDES THE RIO

A Complete Action Novel

By JACKSON COLE

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

He was coming straight toward Derry's aim. Sandra's hand acted with the first warning impulse. Her Colt boomed as she slanted it across her middle. Derry's gun flew from his hand with a whizzing shower of slivers from the upright. He crouched down, gripping his empty right hand, spitting curses from behind set teeth as blood dripped from a lacerated forefinger. He would not be dealing cards soon again.

Carmody dodged back into the house. Sandra leaped from the sorrel and dashed up the porch steps. The door slammed in her face as Holeproof made a wildly rearing halt.

"Sandy!" he called out strickenly. "Don't—"

A saddle gun was jabbed out across a window sill.

"Vamoose from here, the two o' yuh, sudden!" Carmody bellowed.

Derry jumped down from the porch and leaned over to pick up his gun. Holeproof spur-raked the roan. It leaped, colliding with Derry, and sending him crashing back to the edge of the porch.

The rifle in the window made a thunder-clap report under the low-roofed porch, but Carmody missed his pointblank target. Holeproof leaned from saddle and scooped up Derry's gun just as the shot came.

Sandra buffeted the door with her shoulder, but it did not give. She stepped back and sent two bullets crashing through it. The saddle gun was jerked out of sight, then there was the sound of Carmody's leaping run through the house.

"To the back!" she screamed at Holeproof.

He whirled around and got the reins of Lady Belle, who was dancing away from the gun noise and confusion. Sandra made a running leap to saddle. Still holding the sorrel's reins, Holeproof dashed for the dam trail. The girl raged at him to turn and finish the fight, but he galloped on. As they crossed the dam, Holeproof hurled Derry's gun into the pond.

He maneuvered the sorrel ahead of him onto the zigzag trail.

"Keep a-movin'!" he whooped. "Goshamighty, that was a close 'un! If I'd been a second later . . . Say, I got a notion to larrup ye good! Out of the fryin' pan, into the fire, that's a woman for ye!"

Sandra reached a hairpin bend where there was space to whirl Lady Belle around. Her eyes were green flame.

"You—you blundering fool!" she stormed. "It was Carmody! We had him!"

"And I'd of exceeded my authority by ten miles if'n we'd tried to hold him!" Holeproof lashed back at her. "He was on his own premises, and if I'd so much as drawed on him this-away—"

As he whipped out the Colt, the girl gave a cry and reached. Holeproof drew back warily.

"That gun!" she cried tightly. "Let me see it!"

He held it out in his open palm, and she stared transfixed.

"Wh-where did you get it?" she demanded.

"Off'n Carmody. Night 'fore last!"

She was suddenly steadied, but her anger was not gone. Again she drew her own weapon. She thrust it toward the man, butt first.

"Put them together!" she commanded. "Compare them! Look at the markings under the trigger guard!"

He did so, eyes widening at what he saw.

"Why, goshamighty, they're a exack pair! Both got a fancy 'A. L' scrolled thar!"

"Maybe that's proof enough to satisfy you and Captain Bartow!" Sandra exclaimed, with withering scorn. "That gun you took from Carmody was my brother's! The one my father gave him, and mine is the other one of a matched pair!"

Holeproof slumped in the saddle, crestfallen and rebuked.

"Well, all we can do now, I reckon," he muttered, "is to produce this here evidence to the cap'n. Me, I got no authority outside the settlement. And it's ticklish enough thar!"

He returned the Colt to her, put an arm around her shoulders and patted her with rough affection.

"C'mon back, gal," he pleaded soothingly. "Ye got no call to gallivant off and poke yore topknot into this no more. The cap'n will settle with Carmody. He swore to me he would! Anyhow, I crave to get ye back thar at the wagons! Ye ought to have seen them holier'n-thou pilgrims squirm when I told 'em how-come ye was mixed up in that affair at the Bucket of Blood!"

Sandra looked down into the little valley, through the screening trees to the ranchhouse where smoke still spiraled in the still air. Had Carmody fled? Holeproof read the question in her mind.

"He'll bluff it through, on account of he don't know we as good as got a rope around his neck. He won't skip the country. He's got too much at stake. C'mon, let's get."

With mixed feeling of defeat and victory, Sandra silently complied. She was thankful for Holeproof's narrow escape. Reaching the settlement, he headed straight for the fort. Sandra circled the hill to the little cemetery.

On her brother's grave she found fresh flowers and a folded note. It was even briefer than that postscript on Bob's last letter. It said:

> If the dead could speak, they could tell us that justice is not in revenge.
>
> Bruce.

That simple but powerful sentence convinced Sandra more than any argument that the punishment of Bick Carmody did not belong in her hands. The whole dreadful responsibility for avenging her brother's murder slid like a great weight from her.

It would have been a lucky moment for Captain Bartow if he had been there then, instead of with Holeproof Hodkins, at barracks. There, the scout was presenting the last particle of evidence that established Carmody's guilt.

CHAPTER IX

Blood and Rage

NOW Sandra found herself reinstated in the esteem of the immigrants. The train was disbanding. A government land agent at the fort was locating them in families and groups, in the sageland valleys surrounding the fort.

Rountree organized a school district in and around the settlement, and through his gentle but forceful persuasion a school site was established. The members of the train promised to haul lumber and help build the schoolhouse before the snow flew.

"All we need is a schoolma'am," he told Sandra. "Everybody's for you solid, now, even the youngsters. The eddication yuh gave 'em on the go must of been plumb painless. In my day, kids wasn't in favor of studyin'."

"But I've already taught them nearly everything I know," she objected.

"That's all right," he persuaded. "There'll be another crop a-comin'."

"Take over till Christmas," urged Polly Rountree. "In that way, we can be sure you'll be with us then."

Sandra agreed, not because she wanted to, but because she was weary of argument, of wills that sought to bend hers. There was no sense of completion in her own plans. They simply were in abeyance. Until that old clan urge was satisfied, until Carmody paid the price of his blood guilt, she could not contemplate her own future.

Rountree was enthusiastically planning the school building as she brooded on this peace that was not a peace

"We're all fixed except for a stove," he said. "Yuh got to keep the kids thawed out or learnin' won't seep in."

"I'm pretty sure there's a stove that can be spared from barracks," came a voice from the outer dark.

Captain Bartow entered the circle of firelight. His self-assurance had increased since he had last joined that company, but his was not complete triumph. Still he knew that in that moment when his lips had touched Sandra's, and felt their ever so brief response, that she struggled, not against him but against her own impulses.

Rountree developed a sudden drowsiness, yawned prodigiously, and excused himself.

Again Bartow and the girl were alone together. The fire shadows played on his clean-cut face, and Sandra saw a line of determination in his smooth-shaven jaw.

"Derry came into the fort this evening," he told her without preliminary. "He brought a message from Carmody."

"Then he hasn't escaped!"

"Quite the opposite," Bartow said wryly. "He gave notice that if I took any—any legal action against him, that the grazers would refuse to supply the fort with beef."

"Game is plentiful in the hills!" said Sandra.

"Not in winter. Not in numbers to supply the garrison."

Had he come to back down on his promise to arrest Carmody? Was his sense of duty to his command stronger than that promise? Sandra struggled against the rising doubt. That note on her brother's grave was how the captain had paved the way, she feared, for him to argue that the welfare of his troops came first, and could not be jeopardized by her demand that Bob's killer be punished.

"What do you intend to do?" she finally asked.

He did not answer at once.

"All right, let that rascal run the army!" she exclaimed. "Take orders from Carmody!"

HE FACED her, and she saw now that he was resolute.

"You're wrong, Sandra. I'm going to Antelope Creek. Tonight. Now!"

"Not alone?" she cried.

He nodded somberly.

"No! You can't! I won't let you!" she protested.

He gave a short laugh.

"Who's trying to run the army now?"

"You can't keep me from going along!" she defied.

He linked an arm through hers and clasped her hand again between both of his own and pressed her fingertips to his lips.

"You are with me always, sweetheart," he said lightly. "In my thoughts, in my heart. Let us part this once in harmony. Then, when Carmody is in the guardhouse—"

Out of the night's stillness came an alarm of hoofs, across the flats in the direction of the settlement. Arm in arm, the young captain and Sandra turned, as the speeding rider neared the low gleam of the fire.

A blue-coated trooper burst into the camp and flung himself excitedly from saddle. He saluted breathlessly.

"Excuse me, sir!" he jabbered. "But they've come—and it looks like trouble. They—"

"Who?"

"The grazers! Thirty or more of 'em, Cap'n, with Bick Carmody prancin' in front. I seen 'em streakin' for town, and I says to myself, there'll be fireworks, because—"

The rattle of gunfire chopped off his warning, and grimly confirmed it.

"They're shootin' up the town!" yawped the soldier. "Gawd pity the land-seekers that's on the streets!"

Rountree scrambled out of the wagon and rushed past the group, thumbing suspenders over his shoulders as he ran for his piebald mare, staked out a few yards away.

"Wait, Captain!" he yelled. "I'm with yuh in this, up to the hilt!"

Sandra broke away from Bartow.

"We've got to get Holeproof out of it!" she cried. "He won't stand a chance!"

Deaf to Bartow's entreaties, she sped out to Lady Belle, who was picketed near Rountree's mare. Saddling her mount, and with the Colt strapped about her waist, she caught up with the captain, the trooper and Rountree as they spurted from camp.

They raced wildly through the dark, bursts of shooting sounding at intervals, louder and nearer. As they swept down on the settlement, they saw lighted flares thrust in the dust in front of the Bucket of Blood. And by the wavering radiance, a confusion of milling horses, running, fighting, shouting men. And they smelled gunsmoke.

Captain Bartow had despaired of outdistancing the girl. But as they neared the struggle, he motioned the soldier. The two of them closed in on Sandra, hemming her between them, with Rountree's heavy-footed mare bringing up in the rear.

There was a sprawled body near the saloon doorway, one arm dangling limply over the sidewalk edge. Loose horses, settlers' horses, with cut reins dangling from their bits, stampeded up and down the street. By the flare light—cat-tails dipped in lamp oil—a grazer and a bareheaded settler's boy were fighting fiercely. They saw Carmody spur at the pair, lash down with the loop end of his rope. The boy flung up an arm at the stinging cut across his face. His antagonist rushed in, smashed him down, and began kicking his writhing victim.

CAPTAIN BARTOW dashed into the bedlam, hand upraised in a commanding gesture, shouting to be heard above the general confusion.

Carmody, riding a big gray with fancy silvered trappings, turned and faced him defiantly.

"Keep out of it, soldier!" he roared. "Yuh got no call to poke yore nose into this! It's our town, and we aim to run it our own way!"

Rountree went on, hazing the grazer away from the beaten boy. He dismounted, helped the bloody youngster to his feet. The wagon master had a rifle booted to his saddle, but as yet he had made no move to use it.

"Yuh can't take sides, or I'll get yuh busted out o' the army!" Carmody roared at Captain Bartow.

A comparative hush fell over the mob. Everyone was watching Carmody and the officer. Bartow was deadly calm now, and his voice was flat as a saber blade.

"I'm not taking sides. But I'm taking you, Carmody. On the charge of murdering Robert Lane." He rode slowly forward. "Hand over your saddle gun. You're under arrest."

Carmody guffawed.

"Clear out, tin soldier! Before yuh get hurt! Derry, where are yuh?"

"He's got that rube marshal holed up in the back room!" one of the grazers called out from inside the saloon. "C'mon in, some of yuh, and we'll rush him!"

Bartow's service six-shooter glinted as he leveled it menacingly across his saddle front.

"Nobody's going in, and nobody's coming out—not until you come along, Carmody."

"Two can play at that!" one of the riders snarled.

Rountree, shouting a warning, grabbed for his booted gun. But Sandra was quicker. Her Colt flashed to her hand.

"Drop it!"

The rider swore and snicked back his six-gun hammer as he raised it above his head for a crack-down. The girl's gun boomed, and Carmody flinched as smoke billowed past his head. The rider's gun arm came down.

He stared for an amazed instant at a hole in his sleeve, swore again and then gave a sharp yelp as the soldier

jabbed the snout of his Springfield carbine into his ribs.

"Let 'em have it, boys!" roared Carmody, jerking his saddle gun to his shoulder.

Bartow was on him and thrust the muzzle upward as it belched a lick of fire and noise at the sky. Derry leaped out of the saloon. Rountree, shooting across the mare's back, whirled Derry with a bullet-smashed leg. All was sound and fury again, with guns streaking. The mare fell. Rountree dropped behind its kicking bulk, reloading. The soldier from the fort clubbed his rider from saddle, then toppled himself as a grazer's bullet pierced his chest.

Bartow and Carmody were locked in a fierce struggle. Hanging on, the captain was dragged from saddle. Then both men plummeted to the dust, so entangled that none dared shoot to finish the primitive contest, though Sandra sat there, Colt aiming, waiting her chance.

A rider swooped down on her from behind, locked an arm roughly across her throat, and jerked her backward. Then a familiar whoop sounded from the roof of the Bucket of Blood. Sandra glimpsed Holeproof's angular frame, clinging there, and then the image of him was swallowed in a blinding roar as her attacker's hold slid loose. He gave a gurgling cry as he dived to the dust.

DERRY, his hawk-face the color of a toadstool, lay flat, with his broken leg extending at a grotesque angle, and gunned at Rountree. The wagon master's round, flat-topped hat whirled off his head. His saddle gun streaked. Derry gawped, arching his back as he raised on his hands, a livid gash across the top of his head. Then he flopped face down, his one good leg beating a death tattoo on the sidewalk.

Yelling riders swarmed in on Rountree, but Sandra emptied her Colt, scattering them. One horse bucked off, stirrups flapping, its rider sitting in the street, bawling profanity.

There was no keeping track of the details of the milling encounter now. From hiding places in doorways and behind buildings came settlers and others, some unarmed and battling with their fists. Carmody reeled erect, trying to kick free of Bartow's bulldog grip on his foot. Sandra closed in then, aimed a blow at Carmody's head with her empty Colt, missed, but brought a sharp yowl from him at a numbing smash on his left shoulder.

Bartow was on his feet. He drove a fist to Carmody's face. They grappled again and went down in a billow of dust that obscured them.

A rider clutched at the girl, caught her shirtwaist and it ripped. She spun around, fighting like a wildcat. The man struck her in the face and got his fingers into her hair with a savage jerk.

Holeproof's Colt barked again—twice in rapid succession—and Sandra was free again, blood dribbling from an open welt on her cheek.

The hurt of it filled her with a fierceness that drove out all fear. Again she flanked Rountree from attack as he captured and mounted the downed soldier's horse. Then she pivoted the sorrel to Bartow and Carmody, just as a grazer burst out of the saloon doorway, dived headlong across the hitch-rack, and knocked her from saddle. They hit the ground together with such force that it jarred all resistance out of her body.

The man pinioned her with a knee and twisted her arm in an effort to get the Colt away from her.

That gun was more than a weapon. It was evidence, together with the one Holeproof held, that would hang Carmody. She kicked and struggled, her tender skin breaking to the torturing twist, but she would not let go.

A fringed buckskin jacket loomed, and above it the battered face of Swede. With an outlandish battle-cry he came leaping, one gigantic paw

clamping hold of her enemy's throat, hurling him back. Then Swede gripped the helpless grazer in both huge hands, lifted him clear of the ground, and brought him down with a sickening crunch, the small of his back buckling over the hitch-rail.

Swede whirled, hauled Sandra to her feet, caught Lady Belle's reins, and by sheer force dragged the girl and horse out of the carnage, away from the failing light of the torches, and out of the struggle.

"You got enough," he grunted.

Then he spat on his hands and charged back into it.

CHAPTER X

An Arch of Steel

QUIVERING with exhaustion, the girl tried to mount, but Lady Belle danced away and she missed the stirrup. She tried to calm the frightened sorrel, then was aware of a new, eerie radiance that supplanted the light of the cat-tail torches. It came from inside the saloon, shafting smokily out into the street. The one-eyed bartender burst out.

"Fire!" he screamed. "Get buckets!"

Her startled gaze went to the roof, where smoke sifted thickly from below.

"Sizzle that buzzard down off'n the roof, and to hell with the fire!" somebody yelled.

Sandra began tremblingly to reload now. Her twisted arm throbbed with pain that made it almost helpless.

"Hold out, Holeproof!" she screamed encouragement. "I'm coming!"

Carmody came past her, bellying across the saddle of his gray, almost unrecognizable in a mask of blood-wet mud. She tamed Lady Belle and managed to mount, torn between the urge to pursue the escaping man out into the darkness, and to guard Holeproof in his downward scramble and drop to the sidewalk. He was snaking across the wooden canopy over the sidewalk, pausing briefly to send a volley after Carmody. Red tongues of flame darted up through the saloon roof.

Then Captain Bartow made a running leap for his horse. He tore past her, after Carmody. He was weaponless, battered, and his blue uniform was ripped and tattered and dust-smudged.

"Bruce, Bruce!" she cried out after him. "Come back!"

The grazers, seeing their leader flee, went into quick, scattered retreat. The shooting stopped, the yells died down. The devouring crackle of flames was the ominous aftermath, and the heat from the holocaust drove the crowd away from the battle scene.

Holeproof leaped down and scuttled to safety.

Then Sandra bolted out after Captain Bartow and the fugitive. A few yards of it, and with other sounds behind her, she could hear the pound of hoofs ahead.

It was a desperate race, in which Lady Belle could not quite overtake the horses ahead. So exhausted and pain-racked that she could hardly cling to leather, Sandra stayed with the chase. She knew when they came onto the Antelope Creek trail. The dips and rises passed like phantoms under the stars.

She saw Bartow once against the star-spangled sky, as he topped a ridge. She cried out to him, but her voice was a feeble sound and he vanished down the slope beyond.

The little sorrel, fagged and blowing, reached the end of her endurance. Heedless of the girl's prodding thrusts, she dropped to a jolting trot.

Off to the right, then, the girl heard scrambling hoofs in the rocks. Carmody or the captain—one of them—was doubling back. Again she tried to cry out, but the words rasped in her dry throat, and she despaired.

All at once she saw horse and rider,

silhouetted on a ridge. And then, crowding close behind, patterned against the purple sky, came Bartow. She heard him call out a command to halt. Carmody bent low in saddle and spurred furiously.

The grazer did not see the sheer-walled chasm ahead, squarely across his path of flight. Sandra saw him hurtle toward it, and a cry of warning froze in her throat. She flung an arm before her eyes to shut out the spectacle as he paused on the brink. Then came the high-pitched, terrible scream of a horse. And the eerie crescendo of a man's terrified screech as he dropped to black eternity. The thudding crash sent a sickening shudder through her.

SHE looked again into that void that had devoured a life, but a dizzying haze was before her eyes. She swayed, strength seeping from her. She kicked free of stirrups, and as she felt herself going she seized the Colt and fired once, at the ground.

She slid inertly from Lady Belle's back. Her bruised body collapsed gently into the grass beside the trail with a tired sigh. . . .

The rest was a blank, for how long she did not know. Until consciousness, like slow dawn, returned and she found herself cradled in a warm embrace, with another's heart pulsing close to her own. A cheek caressed her brow as her eyes fluttered open.

She stirred and tried to sit erect, but the effort was too much, so she sank back like a drowsy child and nestled there.

Neither of them spoke for ever so long a time. Words were not needed to express an understanding so complete as this. Sandra's hand fluttered up to the face so close above her own, and stole around her man's neck as she drew him toward the sweet surrender of her lips. Her eyes closed again, every fiber in her responding to a swooning joy that ended with a sob of happiness.

Afterward, neither of them knowing whether it was minutes or hours, the purple of the night faded into the lavender of the new-born day. The horses dragged their reins and grazed in the rich grass, and life stirred over the unspoiled world, and the far peaks shone with morning splendor.

They stood together now to admire the glory of a peaceful world and the changing tints of the vast, clean land. Gone was the bitterness of that struggle against land grabbers in a wilderness where there was land enough for all, enough for many generations to come.

"Oregon Territory," the man said reverently. "A new country, our country. Not stolen from any other, but ours by right of discovery, and settlement. It's worth fighting for."

"And worth living for," said the girl.

The spell of beauty and love gripped them until, after awhile, horsemen appeared over a hill, moving toward the settlement. Anxious comrades who had tracked them out on the Antelope Creek trail with the coming of daylight.

They heard Holeproof's glad, resounding shout. He raced toward them, his leggy roan outdistancing Rountree and the others who strung out against the slope.

Peace came to Fort Bent in the weeks that followed. And before snow flew, the new schoolhouse which stood on the ashy ruins of the notorious Bucket of Blood was christened with a wedding.

The affair was unique, even in that raw new town where custom fitted itself to circumstance. Down the aisle the happy couple marched under an arch of steel. Cavalry sabers to the right, tipped against the axes and grubbing hoes and humble implements of the soil gripped by horny hands of settlers to the left of them.

There were grazers, too, and to complete the rich symbolism of harmony, one of them stepped into the

settlers' ranks, and thrust his six-gun up into that shining arch.

THE preacher, a newcomer in a later wagon train, one that followed the way hewn by Bartow, pronounced the words that gave Sandra a name that never would need a feudal violence to defend. And when he finished, he solemnly closed his book and added as a sort of benediction:

"Wondrous are the ways the Lord His works perform."

Holeproof Hodkins loomed like a steeple among the massed guests. And beside him stood his staunch new crony, Swede.

"By golly, they sure be!" said Swede. "We meet in a fight, and now we are friends, pardners, yes?"

"Goshamighty, yes!" boomed Holeproof. "The Good Lord, he gets results from peculiar beginnings, it's a fact!"

And then, lapsing into rhyme, he added:

"Back in old Missoury, where I was takin' root, He made me Fort Bent's marshal by spillin' hog fat on my foot!"

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

ROMANCE RIDES THE RIO

A Complete Romantic Novel by JACKSON COLE

Plus Novelets by JOHNSTON McCULLEY *and* EUGENE A. CLANCY
—and Many Other Stories

Sudden Romance

By GEORGE E. MAGEE

Author of "The Plowhorse," "Dinner's Waiting," etc.

"C'mon out an' fight!" Talbot ordered

Betrayed by a Lawless Sidewinder, Gail Bentley Pins Her Hope of Security and Love on a Stranger!

GAIL BENTLY felt suddenly cold inside when the few cars filled with bawling, poor-conditioned Circle C stock pulled out of La Prez. When a ranch shipped cattle like that it was close to the end of its rope, Gail thought. She lifted a gloved hand in a gesture of assent to her foreman, and headed across the dusty dirt street for breakfast. Five hours to load four cars! Sullen, unpaid men didn't hurry. Her blue eyes were dark with her thoughts as a man slid over the high stool next to her. She shrank away, thinking

that it was "Skillet" Talbot, her foreman, who had been forcing his attentions upon her ever since her father's death. A pleasant drawling voice that wasn't at all like Talbot's wished her, "Good morning."

She nodded without looking up, not seeing the broad shoulders and the friendly face of the athletically built man who sat beside her. The stranger's humorous brown eyes gave her a long and approving inspection before he spoke to the blond waitress.

"Coffee and waffles, sister," he ordered, and added, "This is a right cool country."

Gail looked up then. Already the restaurant was filled with the stifling Arizona heat. Solemn of face, but his eyes twinkling, the man met her gaze with admiring directness and bowed slightly. His range clothes were stained with dust, as if he had ridden far and fast. She saw the two guns tied low, and the lines of fatigue on the carelessly confident face.

"Now take down in Texas," he continued, "a man generally gets an answer to 'good morning'. Might not mean much, but it's sort of polite."

It was impossible not to smile at him. "Good morning," said Gail. Then, in response to the surprising warmth and challenge in his face and manner, "Does that satisfy you?"

"Not entirely, Ma'am," he returned respectfully. "I'm a queer fellow. Smith's the name. I was branded Hortensio, but mostly called Hort. I get right curious about people sometimes, but otherwise I'm harmless, housebroke, and sort of popular. Why, the boys wanted to give me a party when I left Texas." Smith rubbed a shoulder ruefully, then grinned. "But they didn't—not quite."

He took a sip of coffee, his spoon clamped tightly to the cup, and his finger crooked in exaggerated politeness. His eyes sparkled, as if inviting the world to rejoice in his escape.

Gail and the waitress laughed. But the owner of the Circle C felt a sense of loss. "Hort" Smith was just another gabby puncher. Her first impression had been wrong. Before she could answer his light but leading words, the door of the café was darkened by the gorillalike form of her foreman. Talbot had evidently been drinking and came purposely down the aisle. He spoke in a hard voice as he came.

"The boys aim to get some dinner off you."

GAIL flushed. "I can't, Talbot," she protested. "Not until—" she felt sudden fear as she saw Talbot's face darken. But before he could continue the voice of Smith, humorous, but without any suggestion of a drawl interrupted.

"That isn't the way to speak to a lady," he said firmly.

Talbot grinned wickedly. "Hi," he ejaculated, in simulated surprise, "there's a half-pint hidin' behind you, Miss Gail."

She heard quick movement behind her, saw her foreman stab for his gun. Smith stepped in like a panther, crashed a right against Talbot's chin. The foreman's head snapped back. He swayed, and wilted down beside the stools. Smith walked ahead, keeping his eyes on Talbot who was getting up, his face black with killing rage.

Instinctively the girl pushed between them, but Smith thrust her back.

"Beg pardon, Ma'am," he said, "but it always makes me mad to have a man gun-bluff me."

Talbot struggled to his feet, oaths pouring from his slobbering lips. He lunged wildly at the man who was almost a head shorter than him.

Smith gave ground warily, flicking lefts into the hate-twisted face. The foreman changed his tactics then. He spread his arms wide and lunged to corner his opponent. Gail had seen Talbot manhandle a steer and she knew the pitiless power of those arms. She gasped out a warning as Smith was being forced into a corner.

She cried out in terror as the foreman swung a great boot for a disabling kick. But Smith crouched quickly, came up like a jack-in-the-box, grasped the up-flung foot in both hands, and, with an expression almost of pity, sent his assailant flying to crash against the stools.

Talbot slumped to the floor, his face twisting in pain. Smith dusted his hands nonchalantly, leaned down, grasped Talbot's limp arm and rolled him on his shoulders in a fireman's carry. Then, he walked outside and placed him gently in the street. Smith came quickly back and stood beside the girl who stared at him in open admiration.

"Reckon we can finish breakfast now," he drawled. "Sit down, won't you?"

Gail struggled to speak, and to cover her embarrassment, Smith turned to the waitress.

"How about some fresh waffles and coffee," he suggested. "A little argument makes me peckish."

"You sure can fight, Mister," admired the waitress.

But Smith let that pass, and turned to Gail. "What started the ruckus? I sort of forget."

"You seemed to think—" began Gail.

"Ugh!" said Smith, tipping back his battered hat, which, in the manner of Texas hats, miraculously remained on his head, and running his hand through close-cropped red hair. "I was long-horning in as usual. Seems like I never do learn."

"Thanks for what you did," said Gail quickly. "I've been having a little trouble with Talbot since father died."

A burning spark of interest showed in Smith's eyes. "You wouldn't be looking for a foreman, Ma'am?"

Gail hesitated. After all, she knew nothing about this man. Suddenly the door banged open and the heavy form of Talbot, closely followed by three Circle C punchers, barged in. Talbot, white about the mouth with killing anger, waved his gun wildly.

"Come out and fight, you skunk," he bawled.

Smith put down his cup slowly. "After breakfast," he promised. "One of you boys go hunt up the sheriff. I want a witness that the fight is fair."

Gail's throat ached. "He's the best shot in Arizona," she whispered warningly. "He'll kill you!"

SMITH leveled his eyes on Talbot who stood hesitating. "Get going," he snapped. "That's the law, hombre. A condemned man has a right to a last meal."

Talbot half turned, and then stiffened. "I'll let the sun through you, yuh damned sneakin' coyote!" His words giving him courage, he swung his gun to bolster his threat. "Come out now," he ordered.

"Shore, shore," soothed Smith, as if humoring a child. He half rose from the stool, and, with a movement too swift to follow, snaked his gun out and slammed a shot at Talbot. The long black gun in Talbot's hand was knocked through the window. Smith reached for his cup again. "Better get another gun," he said quietly. "That one's ruined."

"Gosh," the waitress gasped. "Gosh!"

"Tricks in all trades," Smith remarked, winking over his cup.

Gail's thoughts whirled. To all appearances Smith was a careless fool playing with death. But the deftness of his moves, the evident iron nerves, and something hard under his humor, convinced her that he knew exactly what he was doing. Curiosity filled her heart. Curiosity, and something more, for at the moment she found herself grasping both of Hort Smith's hands.

"Do be careful!" she pleaded, an ache in her heart.

For a moment Gail and Smith, stood face to face, their eyes searching for

answers. Hort seemed to have found his for his face blazed with a rush of emotion. Almost reverently he raised Gail's hand and touched his lips to the back.

"I will, believe me, I will," he breathed.

Gail was conscious only of the wild beating of her heart.

As if that settled everything, Hort Smith took a last drink of coffee, spilled some change on the counter and inspected his gun, turning the cylinder back on the dead shell. Then he walked to the door with measured stride.

The two women followed. Gail's knees trembled and the waitress breathed in quick gasps. They watched Smith stroll to the center of the street, glance up and down, loosen his gun in the holster, and begin rolling a quirly. Gail fought down a wild impulse to drag him from danger. All the protective instinct that a woman feels for a man she loves burned in her heart. Yet she knew she could do nothing, dared do nothing. That was the way of the West.

The sheriff came running from the north, while from the other direction Talbot stalked. His face was calm; his anger under control. The cold determination of a killer was in every move. Twenty paces separated the men when Talbot halted. Smith put his rolled smoke behind his ear, and dropped his hand to his belt.

"Pull, yellow-belly," shouted Talbot, "before the sheriff saves yore mangy hide." With the challenging words Talbot stabbed for his gun. A shot crashed! Talbot's gun spun high and dropped a yard behind him.

Smith stood spraddle-legged, half turned to the side, his smoking gun held waist high.

"The gun ain't hurt," he assured the blank-faced foreman. "I just nicked the barrel. Pick her up if yuh want another chance."

Talbot stood as if stunned. When the sheriff lunged for the street, Smith's voice was only a whisper as he waved his gun gently.

"Stay on the sidewalk, Law," he ordered.

The sheriff stayed put.

Talbot whirled quickly, scooped up his gun, and triggered as he turned.

A thrill of relief and assurance knifed into Gail's heart. The code was satisfied. Smith could shoot in self-defense now. She gasped in horror as Smith, grinning tightly, reached for his cigarette.

"Missed!" he sneered. "How many shots you want?"

BLACK rage at the taunt made Talbot's shots go wild. While bullets threw spurts of dust behind him, Smith lifted a bootheel, scratched a match and lighted his cigarette. He inhaled deeply and blew a raft of smoke toward the sky. He had transferred his gun to his left hand. It remained there while the girl, frozen with terror, watched Talbot in a frenzy of hurry dig for shells, and with shaking fingers try to reload while keeping an eye on Smith.

With a wild cry of, "Don't Talbot, don't!" Gail ran into the street. Hort was going to be shot down!

"Oh, well," said Smith, disgust in his voice, and fired as Talbot's gun flashed up.

The foreman's gun appeared to explode in his hand. He bent over quickly, his face chalky, and clasped his hand between his knees.

Smith glanced at the sheriff, and walked forward. He picked up Talbot's gun and examined it carefully. He smiled with satisfaction as he noted that the bullet had struck the stock. He bent forward, stuck the gun in the foreman's holster and spoke so low that no one could hear.

Talbot's face showed his surprise. He took a quick step backward, and walked uncertainly but swiftly toward his horse.

Gail heard approving comments from the astonished crowd which had

gathered. One puncher let out a whoop and slapped the sheriff on the back.

"How'd yuh like to have him for a deputy?" he yipped.

The sheriff barked an oath, and turned up the street to his office in the manner of a man getting to the windward of a bad odor.

Smith strode over to Gail, looked intently into her face.

"I'll be back," he promised. Then he mounted his horse and rode after Talbot.

Gail found herself holding the hand of the waitress in a cramping grip. The blond girl let out her breath slowly.

"Some people have all the luck," she sighed.

The twelve mile ride to the ranch gave Gail time to think. The picture of the calm man lighting his smoke while bullets buzzed about him stayed in her mind. It made her heart surge with joy.

A growing suspicion of what Talbot's absences from the ranch and the apathy of the sheriff towards her losses of cattle might mean gnawed at her mind. She had talked the matter over with Charley Summers, the cashier at the bank, on her last visit to town.

He had said something about a newly formed Cattleman's Protective Association and the possibility that they might send a man to inspect the county. She had thought little of it. Arizona cattlemen had always taken care of their own troubles. But now her heart beat furiously with a sudden hope; and a sudden fear. She wanted to believe that Hort Smith's actions were personal rather than official. Not that there was a lack of men in her life.

She knew that she possessed a quiet beauty that appealed to men. But so far she had been content with casual friendships. She had hardly considered marriage. The quick shuffle of her pony's feet on the dusty road that led to the low ranchhouse seemed to be endlessly repeating, "Hortensio, Hortensio, Hortensio." A thrilling sense of well being raced in her mind.

Then she thought of Talbot. She had thrust aside his clumsy attempts at courting, but she knew he would not be content with his defeat. He would be back again. Besides, it was almost a certainty that he had been rustling cattle from the ranch, and he was the kind who would drygulch a man. Where was Hort Smith? What would be his next move?

SHE had eaten her dinner when she heard the pounding thunder of the punchers galloping home. She went to the window. Neither Smith nor Talbot rode with them.

Bill Thompson, an elderly man who had been her father's *segundo* in the more prosperous days of the ranch, came to the house.

"I saw Smith before he left town," he explained. "He seemed to think yuh hired him as foreman. He said he'd be along in the morning."

"Where's Talbot?" asked Gail quickly.

Thompson shrugged. "I guess he high-tailed out of town. Say, ain't that Smith a dinger? Know where he comes from?"

Gail shook her head. "He asked for a job, but we didn't make a deal. I'll see him when he comes, but until then I want you to take charge. I'll tell the men at breakfast."

With a strangely troubled face Bill Thompson turned and went out.

Gail slept but little that night. She was up early next morning and spent more time than usual in dressing. Seeing nothing of Smith she went to the cook shack.

Pedro, the Mexican cook, flashed white teeth at her question. "In the night a man came pounding at my door. An' who ees eet but my amigo from Texas. My seester she know heem too. They are *muy sympatica*. My seester's hoosband he is no good.

He smoke the weed. Wan time he try to keel my seester and Senor Smeeth. Weeth a knife he try."

Gail felt her heart sink swiftly. Hort Smith was evidently a man of many parts.

"All right," she said, not wishing to hear more. "Where did he go?"

"That he do not say," said Pedro, shrugging.

So much for dreams, thought Gail. Her heart seemed empty.

The pounding of horses' hoofs crashed into her thoughts. Bill Thompson came in holding a money belt.

"Smith was here and left early," he explained. "He wants yuh to take care of this money. Says he's taking a little trip and he'll be back."

"I theenk," offered Pedro, "he breeng back Maria weeth heem."

"What was he doing in Texas when you knew him?" asked Gail.

Pedro's eyes became suddenly big. "*Madre de Dios!*" he exclaimed. "What should 'e do? 'E fight, always 'e fight. 'E ees the bes' shooter in Texas."

Gail knew of conditions on the Texas range. The long fight between the sheep and cattlemen, and the continuous edging of squatters on the ranges, gave employment to many men like Smith. He was just a gunny who sold his skill, and had affairs with Mexican women. According to his own story he was out of favor in Texas. Probably he had tired of Mexican women too.

But Gail couldn't quite forget the expression in his eyes as he looked at her. Then too, his following of Talbot required an explanation. Bitterly she knew that her heart rested in the hands of a gunman. Her mind told her the evidence was strong against him, but her heart refused to consider that.

Two weeks after Smith had made his early morning call she received a notice from the bank that a check had come for the cattle.

She rode into La Prez, taking Smith's money belt with her.

Charley Summers listened to her story of how she came by it. His face darkened.

"Three weeks ago the El Paso stage was robbed," he said. "About two thousand in gold was taken. The driver got killed." As he spoke, he emptied the money belt. "Mexican gold. Looks like the money." Turning to a clerk, "See if you can find the sheriff."

WHILE Gail waited tensely for the sheriff, she turned over in her mind all the facts she knew. Smith had been in La Prez four days after the robbery. He bore all the marks of a long ride. A sudden thought struck her. Talbot had been absent for a week about that time. He had gone, or so he said, down into Mexico to look for some yearlings.

The sheriff stalked in and studied the gold. "No way of telling," he admitted, "but when a gunny carries that much it's a cinch he didn't earn it. I'll just take care of this and do a little telegraphing." He scribbled a receipt for Gail, asked if she knew anything of Smith, and, getting a negative answer, looked hard at her. Then he went out.

Hopes crashed in Gail's brain. She drew enough money to pay her men, and, after doing a bit of trading and fending questions about the cause of the fight between Smith and Talbot, she rode back to the ranch, resolved to take Thompson and try to find Smith. She owed him a warning. Besides, she had a burning curiosity about Maria.

A few questions indirectly asked of Pedro told her what she wished to know. Maria didn't live in Texas but just across the Border in Mexico. That made it easier. The hundred mile desert trip across the corner of New Mexico Territory was not to be attempted at this time of year. But from the south edge of the Circle C

ranch a series of broken ranges called the Sierra Randall led to the Border.

Two days later Gail and Thompson, leading pack horses with supplies for two weeks, took the trail through Diablo Canyon. Their first camp was made late in the afternoon in a bowl-like depression in the canyon wall. In looking for wood, Gail came upon a buzzard-torn and coyote-gnawed hide with the Circle C brand on it. Thompson scratched his head, went looking about for signs, and presently came back.

"There's been a lot of beef driven through here since the rain," he explained. "I found a couple more skulls. But, hell, that don't mean nothing. The Mexes is always stealing a few head. It looks as if some gang had camped here often. There's no wood left, and there's lots of charcoal against the cliff.

"I never did trust Talbot. He might have had something to do with our loss of stock, but if he did he was pretty slick. He had a gang working with him from this side." He took a quick look around, said, "I don't think much of the idea of camping right here. We'd better go on ahead a ways, and duck down a side gully."

The words were scarcely spoken when five riders galloped toward them led by the giant Talbot.

Thompson cursed and stabbed for his gun. He was covered instantly by the four dark-faced Mexicans, rifles in hand.

Talbot rode forward with an evil grin. "Look who's come to visit us," he exulted. "I was just goin' to the ranch. Where's Smith?"

Gail made no answer. A cold loathing filled her body as she saw what his face revealed.

Talbot rode forward, grasped her roughly and swung her across his saddle before him. She struck out wildly with all her strength. But he smothered her efforts with an ease that sent a new chill of fear into her heart. In response to a profane command two of the men roped and tied Thompson without any resistance from the old *segundo*.

Talbot righted her into the saddle, his whiskey laden breath hot on her neck.

"I been planning this for a long spell," he snarled. "'Fore I get through with yuh, you'll be glad to be my woman. It's better than them Border resorts in Mexico."

The words made his purpose clear. Gail shrank from his touch.

"Smith'll get you," she cried.

TALBOT laughed. "The law'll look after him. I got that fixed." He reined his horse about. "You galoots camp here," he ordered the Mexicans. "Me and the lady's got a date down the canyon."

As he set spurs to his horse, Gail threw herself back with all her strength. Her head crashed on his chin. She felt him sway, but the next second his ham-like hand struck the side of her face with stunning force. She was half unconscious when he dragged her from the saddle and tied her hand and foot.

Talbot set about making a fire after he had tethered his horse. He seemed uneasy, and stopped to listen often. Hope came to the girl. Smith might be on Talbot's trail. She offered a little prayer as she watched Talbot's fattish, repulsive bulk move about the fire. The man hunched over the small blaze, wolfing beans and biscuits while the darkness fell about them. Finally, he arose and wiped his hands on his levies. Knife in hand he came toward her!

The scream of terror that came from her throat almost prevented him from hearing the crash of shots that sounded from the upper camp. Talbot stepped back, listened a moment.

"That settles Smith," he remarked, grinning evilly. "I thought he'd be along. Now let's have a little talk. You ain't got much left in the world, gal. You need a man. Might as well

have a good one. I'm set to make money, and I'll treat yuh right—if you behave."

The knife was already on the rope about her feet and her body was tensed. Suddenly, they both heard the pounding bootheels of a man running over the rocks of the canyon bottom.

Talbot whirled, pulling his guns. Ochre flashes stabbed at a running shadow. The bounding figure which Gail recognized as Smith's—the hat identified him—threw up its hands and plowed limply down on the rocks.

Gail felt the bullets smash into her own heart. Smith was dead! The last hope was gone. Her senses swam, but she couldn't take her eyes from that sinister shadow.

Talbot went cautiously forward to make sure. He started, swore, and whirled to meet the menace of a calm voice that spoke from behind him.

"I didn't think you'd fall for that old trick," said Smith, "but I guess you were born to be hung. Drop yore guns!"

"How the—" husked Talbot, as he let his guns clatter to the rocks.

"That's the fellow that helped you rob the stage. I gave him my hat and the choice of getting shot or hung. But I told him yuh couldn't shoot worth a damn," explained Smith, humor creeping into his voice. "He had it coming though, and Maria will be glad to know he's dead."

Gail could see Smith advancing toward Talbot. Something in his walk spoke of his purpose. He was determined to manhandle Talbot for his own satisfaction. Even while her heart felt like lead at the import of the words about the Mexican, evidently the husband of Maria, she had the safety of Smith at heart.

"He's got a knife," she cried out.

Her words were nearly the undoing of Smith. He tensed, turned, and took a step in her direction.

"Gail?" he questioned.

Against the light of the sky Gail saw Talbot leap like a giant frog to land on Smith's shoulders and crash him to the ground. Struggling wildly, Gail rolled toward the threshing forms. A dry root blazed in the fire.

Gail saw the running form of a woman. A slim Spanish woman with a gleaming knife in her hand. The bitter certainty that this was Maria coming to save Smith and the strain Gail had endured was too much for her. She felt deeper darkness crushing her, a numbness seized her heart. A cry died on her lips as she fainted.

HER next conscious moment came when she dimly realized that she lay in a woman's lap, the coolness of water on her face. The lap on which she rested was hard. There was nothing of the softness of youth in the limbs. For the first time Gail had a suspicion that Maria might not be as young and charming as she had pictured her. She had confirmation in the harsh voice and the scolding words of the woman. Maria was speaking to Smith.

"You are a fool, Senor Smeeth. How much you think a girl can stan'? She faint because she love you."

Gail opened her eyes just a bit. The fire had been built up. She saw Smith looking down at her. The tirade of Maria began again.

"'Ave you tol' her you love her?"

Gail could hear the hurt in Hort's voice as he protested. "Me? Shore not. I'm not fit. I've been working for tough outfits too long. Even they run me out."

"An' for why?" snorted Maria. "Because they know you were working for the cattlemen and because you protec' me. What you theenk she come hunting you for?"

Disgust was evident in Maria's voice. "What you go running down to Mexico for? You know a dozen men want to keel you. To get back the cattle she lose, that is why. And to catch this Talbot and get back the money for the sold cattle. Is that

your business? No! *Madre de Dios,* you are a fool—and a saint, Senor Smeeth.

"A gunman, you? How many you keel, eh? Tell Maria the truth," she coaxed. "Why have you always turn your back on women. Why have you waited when many have offered favors? Because you sought one like this, who is brave and has a face and heart like an angel. I tell you her heart beats loud for you."

The proof of this statement was directly under the hand of the Mexican women. Now fully conscious, Gail felt a wild desire to know what Smith would say next, and a growing appreciation of the astuteness of Maria, who evidently knew she was hearing every word.

"She's only a child," said Smith.

"And you love her," said Maria, prompting.

Smith groaned.

Maria pinched Gail shyly. Gail took the hint and she feigned an awakening. Her first word came directly from her heart.

"Hortensio?" No man could mistake her meaning.

With a glad cry Smith knelt and gathered her tenderly into his arms. She could feel his whole body tremble. Her lips followed the stubble line of his cheek until they rested on his. Then he pushed her gently away from him. She could see his face shining strangely as he knelt there. The same glow was in her heart. . . .

Thompson had gathered his prisoners and brought them down to the fire. Talbot lay tied securely in the shadows. The moon had risen, but gave scant light for traveling in the rough mountains. They decided to camp there. Smith made two blanket beds close to the rock. Gail lay on her blankets looking at the stars, too happy for sleep. Smith smoked quietly.

"That money I left," he said. "It's yores now. It'll help build up the ranch. Seems funny that Talbot should have a hand in that. It was the money he got for your cattle. I—I'm not an outlaw, Gail. I'm a detective for the Cattleman's Protective Association."

GAIL wanted to hear different words. She drew toward Smith. He gathered her close to him.

Maria sat up and gazed at them. *"Madre de Dios,"* she said, and made the sign of the cross.

If you happen to be in Arizona and see the Circle C ranch sign, drop in for a visit. You'll find a stalky, smooth-faced man hanging around the horse corral with a small duplicate tugging at his hand. While he talks to you Smith's eyes will wander up to the wide porch, and if a graceful woman comes out, they'll glow with love. You can feel the warmth.

It makes the Circle C a nice place to stay for a few days—or forever. At least Mrs. Smith thinks so.

Branded by Love

By WILTON WEST

Author of "Doubling for a Deputy," "Lass of the Sleepy M," etc.

He drove a rattle of shots at the outlaws

CHIP CALHOUN, riding her palomino over her father's wide-flung Box O range in the glorious September afternoon of southern Arizona, sniffed suddenly and jerked to a halt. The smell of burning mesquite was drifting from a rugged, timbered canyon a short

Torn Between Romance and Loyalty, Chip Takes the Straight Road—to Find It Is Cupid's Own Trail!

distance ahead, and a wispy, whitish column of smoke was ascending from the brushy depths below.

Her sunny head lifted sharply and into her blue eyes leaped a startled light.

"Fire!" she gasped. "And not a drop of rain for two months!"

She snapped taut her loosened reins and touched spurs against her horse's flanks. The animal darted toward the rim. As Chip approached it, she drew to another quick halt. Men's voices were floating up from below—angry voices; at least one voice was. The other voice she recognized instantly. It was that of Sandy Blair, her father's top hand and destined soon to be promoted to the foremanship of the Box O.

And Sandy had become the possessor of her twenty-year-old heart, though she hadn't confessed that to anyone yet, except to Sandy himself. With a swift feeling that he was in danger she jerked her holstered Colt .38 farther forward on her trim hip and grasped its butt. Sliding from her horse, she dropped the reins and tiptoed through the high brush until she stood right on the canyon's edge, looking down, but concealed from the eyes of the men below.

Sandy was standing over a hog-tied calf, holding a running iron in one hand, and with both hands now elevated shoulder high. His new gray Stetson hung behind his neck, his yellow rodeo shirt was open at the throat. The sunlight struck against his rumpled, crisp blond hair. His clean-shaven, bronzed face wore a quizzical expression, almost amused, as he looked at the other man. Back a few yards, Sandy's saddled black grazed with dragging reins.

The other man was astride a strong built chestnut mare, scowling and covering Sandy with a six-gun. The rider was tall, wide of figure, dusty, unshaven. A wide-brimmed black sombrero shaded his face.

Chip studied him keenly and almost exclaimed as she recognized him. She quietly drew out her revolver, thumb on hammer.

"Jim Holt, as sure as I'm born!" she told herself.

SHE had seen various sheriff's posters up in town, with Holt's description and photograph. He was wanted for murder, for rustling, as head of the gang that for months had been making Rawhide Valley a wild place. Big rewards hung over the man's shaggy head, all reading "Dead or Alive."

"So, Blair!" he was saying gruffly, as he rode slowly nearer to Sandy, keeping his gun leveled. "Caught yuh red-handed, eh? Blotchin' yore own boss' cattle with somebody else's brand, eh?"

An odd smile flashed across Sandy Blair's dusty face.

"I reckon blotchin' brands don't never worry you much, Jim Holt. Castillo'd as soon buy rustled stuff from me as from you, he says, and yuh've been sellin' him plenty. You and me oughta team up. How about it?"

Holt scowled harder, fingering his cocked gun. Suspicion lay in his icy eyes.

"So yuh know who I am, eh?" he said harshly. "Well it won't do yuh no good, Blair. Turn around, drop that runnin' iron an' throw yore guns in the brush!"

Sandy did as told, then turned back and grinned.

"I'm makin' yuh an offer, Holt," he stated levelly. "Old Calhoun's havin' me do all the tallyin' of Box O cattle these days, and he'll never miss what I've been sellin' to Castillo. He owns too damn many cows to ever miss thirty or forty occasional strays." A wink told volumes. "If we pardner up, Holt, we can double our stakes, easy."

Up in the dense brush of the rim, Chip felt her heart sink, her nerves quiver. Sandy, confessing to rustling

from the Box O, and offering to work in with the Holt gang! And Sandy's lips had touched hers only the evening before! His strong arms had held her close.

"Crawl off yore bronc, Holt," Sandy suggested, "and squint this here blotch. Betcha it's as good a Castillo brand as you ever put on somebody else's critters. You and me could work together fine and dandy. Old Calhoun's trustin' me like I was his own son."

Holt gave a curt, gruff laugh. "Like his own son, eh? That's a good one, Blair, if yuh knowed my meanin'."

Still gripping his gun, he stepped down from his saddle, strode beside the calf, studied the changed brand, then nodded approvingly.

"Good job, all right," he admitted, eyeing Sandy from narrowed eyes, then smiling slightly. "So that's been yore game, eh? Well"—he holstered his gun—"let's talk about tyin' up together. I'm needin' another man willin' to work my way."

He bent over the roped calf, his back toward Sandy and studied the changed brand more closely.

"Yeah," he went on, "if yuh'll join us, we can shore double our winnin's, Blair." Turning his head around without straightening up, he spoke again, more gruffly: "But yuh'll take orders from me. *I'm* boss, so don't try no damn trickery, or I'll shore lam the life outa yuh."

HE TURNED back and looked at the calf. Sandy's right foot drove forward, landed on the seat of Holt's pants and sent the rustler headlong. He plowed into the gritty sand beyond the calf and lay asprawl as Sandy grabbed up one of his own guns and covered him. His gray eyes were now like steel.

"Now get holdin' the sky with *yore* hands, Holt!" he ordered. "I said we'd be pardners, not that I'd be one of yore heel-dogs. It's fifty-fifty or nothin'."

His face twitching with fury, Holt rose. Sandy stepped forward, jerked away Holt's holstered guns and tossed them into the brush.

"Damn yuh!" Holt roared. "Double-crossin' me, eh? Gonna try takin' me to town to draw down them rewards, eh? Well, yuh won't never live to spend 'em, once my boys get after yuh!"

Sandy shoved his gun back into his holster.

Chip, up on the rim, watched tensely, fingering her own drawn gun. Horror at what she had just heard from the lips of the man she loved gripped her as though a steel band were about her heart. She was sick with mortification, to think that she had given her love and her kisses to a brand blotter! A rustler of her own father's cattle.

She half turned to slip away and shut out, forever, the scene of treachery before her. But Sandy's next words stopped her. Maybe Sandy was only fooling the outlaw.

"So yuh'd like lammin' the life outa me, eh, Holt?" Sandy was saying half humorously. "Well, before we tie up as pardners, let's settle that little point." He tossed his gun aside, followed it by his hat. "Takin' me on, feller?"

Holt, a full two inches taller than Sandy Blair and much heavier, glared, then dropped into a half crouch, his massive fists and arms swinging forward, ready to rend.

"Damn yuh, Blair!" he gritted. "Ain't no man ever kicked me thataway and . . ." He came slowly forward, shoulders hunched, lips twitching. "Yuh said for us to pardner up, but—"

Sandy also assumed a half crouch. The two men began slowly circling around each other.

"Yuh heard me right, Holt," Sandy taunted, "but we'll talk about that after the lammin' yuh're honin' for."

Up on the rim Chip watched with wide eyes. Her heart pounded. She did not want to see Sandy beaten

down into a pulp by Jim Holt, rustler and killer, a brute for strength. But Sandy's confession of rustling burned in her brain, and his offer to join Holt's gang. The thought flashed to her that she could shoot Holt. It would be legal, and she could save Sandy from a mauling.

But her gun hand did not raise. Killing Holt and confronting Sandy with her knowledge of his treachery to the Box O would not bring back to her the old, splendid Sandy Blair who had won her love. He was as bad now, as Holt.

With a muttered curse Holt rushed, great arms flailing, fists clenched. Sandy, lithe as a young panther, hard as steel, sidestepped and drove in two tremendous blows to Holt's jaw, staggering the man badly. With a roar, Holt charged again, but again met two terrific blows that sent him reeling.

THAT Sandy had won an amateur boxing contest up in Phoenix only a few weeks before, was unknown to the outlaw. The blows spun him around, teetered him on his high-heeled boots. Blood began oozing from his mouth and nose. As he brushed an arm across his battered face, Sandy landed two more and Holt crashed down heavily, flat on his back, where he lay cursing and spitting blood.

Sandy stepped back and smiled slightly, got his guns and holstered them, then stood watching Holt half amusedly. The rustler staggered up, stood spitting blood, wiping his face with both forearms, glaring. Then he grinned.

"You win, Blair," he admitted. "Pardners it is, from now on. I like a fightin' man. No hard feelin's between us, eh?"

He reached out a hand and the two men shook.

"*Bueno,* Holt!"

Sandy laughed. He stepped beside the calf and jerked off the hogging-string. The little creature went dashing southward, tail high.

Riding side by side, the two followed it at a lope. Only a few miles in that direction lay the Mexican border.

Chip watched them go, tears in her eyes and her heart a dull ache. But as she mounted her palomino her old pride flooded back and her blond head tossed. Loyalty and love for her father and the Box O rose supreme within her. She would cast out every atom of love for Sandy Blair, forever, and she would tell everything to her father and warn him. She felt deep loathing of herself for ever having allowed Sandy Blair's lips to touch hers.

As she rode, she was remembering the day, six months before, when Sandy, tired, dusty, half sick, had ridden up to the Box O and asked for a job, admitting he was broke. He had just recovered from pneumonia up in Wyoming, he had said, and had come down to Arizona to get his strength back.

Sandy had strangely stirred Chip, and had aroused her quick sympathy. She had fed him, doctored him, and made him get to bed under the doctor's care. It had been several weeks before he regained his strength. And those weeks had seen love gradually come into Chip's young heart and, apparently, into his.

She had easily induced her father to put Sandy on the Box O payroll, and he had proved to be an expert cowboy. Old Calhoun had come to trust him completely, and for some time had been openly saying he was soon going to make Sandy foreman. Chip and Sandy had been keeping their love to themselves, waiting until Sandy actually had the promotion. Now, when she told what she knew, the ranchmen would trail Sandy and —and hang him!

Everything seemed dead in Chip's heart now as she halted before one of the Box O corrals and dismounted.

She unsaddled and turned her palomino into the corral, feeling dragged down from head to foot.

In the ranchhouse, the windows were shining with evening lights. But before she went there she must find old "Shotgun" Hall, her father's aging foreman and tell him everything. All her life he had been a second father to her, a tried and true confidante, an understanding heart. He would know what to do, but the thought of telling of Sandy's treachery tortured her. Love certainly dies hard.

CHIP turned to walk across the dark space between corral and ranchhouse, hoping old Shotgun would be in the office and alone. But suddenly she stopped. A tall young man of about twenty-two was lurching toward her drunkenly, muttering to himself, batwings flapping, big Stetson jammed down over surly eyes, arms swinging grotesquely. Chip ran to the cowboy, gripped his arms, looked into his flushed face.

"Ted, Ted!" she whispered hoarsely to her brother. "Oh, and you promised dad and me you wouldn't! You know what dad told you the last time —that he'd make you leave if you did this again! Oh, Ted, Ted, why did you?"

Ted Calhoun slapped an unwashed hand on her shoulder, stood swaying, scowling. A handsome young man, but with weak face.

"Z'all ri', Sis," he mumbled. "He ain't seen me. I'm pullin' out, right now. Got me a swell job. I'm twenty-two an' ain't no man gonna hold me down no more." He swayed closer. "Got any money, Chip?"

Chip's one thought was to have him ride before their father saw him. For months, her brother had been running wild in town, wasting money, drinking, gambling, losing. His father had grown bitter, stern, had made that dreadful threat. She dug into her pockets, drew out a few bills and some coins, thrust them into Ted's hands.

"It's all I have," she whispered, "but almost twenty dollars. Get your horse and ride, and sober up before you come home, Ted darling, please! I don't want you and dad to quarrel again and—"

Ted lunged away in the dark. She heard him in the corral, then saw him ride out and away, heading southward at a swinging lope. She wondered why he was heading that way, toward the wasteland along the Border. Town lay in the other direction. Probably he did not know where he was going. But he was away, anyway, and dad would not see him this time, in a condition where he was ready to fight anybody, even his own father.

Chip walked slowly toward the ranchhouse. What a terrible day! First Sandy, and now Ted!

She forgot about wanting to talk with old Shotgun before she spoke to her father. For now she was anxious to find out whether her father and Ted had quarreled. Had her father ordered Ted from the ranch, for good? If that had happened, what would become of Ted? He was so weak, so easily led, so resentful of their father's clean ways of living.

When she opened the office door, her father and old Shotgun were lounging contentedly in their big chairs, smoking. Relief swept Chip. They could not have seen Ted! But then she stood silent, her mind confused. What should she tell them about Sandy? Devotion to her father and to the Box O again battled against love for Sandy.

"Hullo, Chip!" Her father smiled affectionately. "Have a nice ride?"

She drew off her big Stetson, fighting to be her natural self as she dropped into a chair. Every nerve was pounding. How much should she tell these two stern, old cowmen of the valley?

"Yes, Dad," she managed to answer quietly.

But then there surged through here the feeling that silence would be disloyal. The Holt gang had been infuriating the valley ranchmen for months, rustling, holding up stages, murdering old prospectors in the hills. And *that*, she thought, was the kind of men Sandy was preferring to this honorable home!

Her blue eyes, as hard now as diamonds, held to her father's.

"I saw Sandy," she burst out, a quiver in her voice. "He—he was blotting one of our calves, changing our Box O into the Castillo brand, down across the Border."

Old Calhoun jerked up stiffly, staring at her amazedly. Anger slowly flushed his heavily bronzed face and, under his big graying mustache, his lips twitched. Old Shotgun, as grizzled as a mountain goat, rolled another smoke, gazing at her with an odd light in his eyes, but said nothing.

"An' I been trustin' him like a son!" her father said hoarsely. "See anything else, Chip?"

"Yes. That outlaw, Jim Holt, was with him. I recognized him from all those reward posters in town. They rode south together, driving the calf."

Then, in a rush, she told everything she had seen and heard. The two old cowmen had ridden many a long mile, with their cowboys, trailing the Holt gang. Like all the men of the valley they had felt fury against the rustlers. Finally, as she stopped, old Calhoun spoke again, bitterness in his voice.

"Shotgun and me have been thinkin', for a good while, Chip, that you and Sandy'd sorta git spliced one of these days and handle the ranch, leavin' us two old codgers to take a nice, long rest. Shotgun has growed old, like me, and I'm pensionin' him off and was gonna give Sandy the job next month. But now—" His eyes held sadness. He had really grown to love Sandy as another son. And young Ted had turned out to be so weak and unfit for the job. "But if Sandy's done what yuh say, dod-blast him!"

Old Shotgun lifted his pipe from his heavily moustached mouth.

"I wouldn't be actin' too hasty, Boss," he said levelly. "Yuh might regret it."

But Chip's angry father paid him no attention. He rose, slammed on his big hat and hefted his guns about his ample waist.

"Come on, Shotgun!" he said, gruffly. "Wastin' our time palaverin' ain't gettin' us no place. You and me're ridin' over to Sunk Creek Station pronto and takin' the stage for town. We'll get the sheriff and a posse, an' ride to hell-an'-gone this time. And if we catch Sandy Blair—"

They strode away for the corral, saddled swiftly and loped away toward Sunk Creek Stage Station, several miles away.

From the porch, Chip watched them until they disappeared in the high mesquite. Tears were misting her blue eyes. What had she done? Her father, old Shotgun, all men of Rawhide Valley loathed rustlers, killers, and now she felt she had put everyone on the trail of the man she had loved! Loyalty to her father had forced confession from her of what she had seen and heard, but now reaction drove piercingly in her heart.

HOW she was longing to see Sandy come riding gaily out of the distance, smiling, and letting her see that the whole thing had been only a ghastly nightmare, from which his arms would arouse her!

But no horseman appeared as the moonlit night fell about ranch and girl. Just silence, fraught with horror.

Suddenly Chip could stand the strain no longer. She must get word to Sandy to leave the country instantly, and she would plead with him to live right thereafter, even if she never saw him again.

She darted back inside, got her hat, belt and gun, and ran to the corral. Saddling up, she raced away southward with one hope pounding through her brain—that she would find Sandy in time to warn him.

Her mind was anguished. Sandy a rustler, her brother Ted gone off, and now her father and old Shotgun on their way to round up a posse and trail the Holt gang to a finish battle, in which men would be killed! Maybe her father, maybe Sandy.

Several miles down the wide valley she drew to a halt. A hundred yards off to her right, a rumbling of wheels sounded, coming along the stage road leading from the Miracle Mines to town. Chip halted in shadow, listening, watching. Soon the stage came out into moonlight, moving toward Sunk Creek Station, a couple of miles up the road. As it passed along in the bright moonlight of the open, she saw the driver and guard on top. Then the stage swept on—the stage her father and old Shotgun would board at the station.

She was about to ride out of the shadows when suddenly a group of horsemen appeared on the road, riding at a steady gallop about a quarter mile behind the stage. Cold clutched her heart. The Holt gang! And they shot down drivers in cold blood when they held up stages!

Not seeing her hidden in shadow the riders swept by in grim silence. Not a cigarette glowed. Her heart pounded heavily. If this were the gang, chasing the stage, and they didn't try to hold it up until her father and Shotgun were on it. . . .

Courage leaped up to overcome her fears. Gripping the revolver at her hip, she whirled her palomino diagonally northward and raced away to intercept the stage before it could enter the dark hills beyond. She must reach her father and warn him and the stage men, or fight beside them if the gang attacked.

As she came into sight of the stage again, it was just leaving Sunk Creek Station and heading north at a swift gallop, now with a fresh six-horse team. It vanished around a bluff. She stopped her horse in a clump of trees, watching for the group of riders. If they stopped at the station, it would mean they were simply cowboys riding somewhere, but if they kept on following the stage, at that swift pace, it must be the gang. The stage often carried large sums of money from the mines to town, she knew, and it might be carrying it now.

A DULL ache lay in Chip's heart as she remembered Sandy's riding away with the outlaw leader, to join the gang. In his yellow shirt and big new gray Stetson he had looked so splendid, erect in his saddle. But he had joined up with Holt and might be among the group following the stage—to rob and kill! To shoot her father and old Shotgun, his truest friends—men who had trusted him! The thought was bitter as gall.

Suddenly a horse's racing hoofs sounded some fifty yards behind her. She turned in her saddle, ready to run or fight, gripping her gun tightly. But the fast rider was heading toward where the stage had disappeared among the hills. She caught but a fleeting glimpse of him—and her throat seemed to choke.

"Sandy!" she cried, but he did not hear her as he vanished in the tall mesquite.

Almost at once, she again saw the group of horsemen on the road. They flashed past the Sunk Creek Station without drawing rein. As they rode by the lighted windows, she counted them—nine.

The station door opened and a couple of the station hands stepped out and called to the riders, but several quick shots drove them back inside, slamming the door.

Almost instantly, the lights inside went out. Attacks on stations had occurred, and the gang's ways were

well known—to shoot first, and with deadly precision. Killers.

Sure now that it was the Holt gang, Chip spurred after the lone horseman who had vanished toward the north, her gun out and held ready. Sandy, one of the outlaws, was riding to intercept the stage until the others could catch up! She would shoot to kill. Her father's life and old Shotgun's were at stake.

Riding at breakneck speed, she soon heard the rumbling wheels again, the sharp cracking of the driver's long bullsnake whip. Those on the stage must have heard those shots back at the station and were sending the stage along at flying speed.

A few minutes more and she reached a low hill a hundred yards ahead of the stage. The team was coming at swift gallop, the driver cracking his long whip, the guard facing the rear, grasping his Winchester. She caught a glimpse of men inside the vehicle.

"Dad and Shotgun!" she told herself, and knew that they were gripping drawn guns, too.

She glanced quickly around. What had become of Sandy? Was he watching her from some place of concealment? Maybe covering her with a gun?

On top of the hill, she left her rein-dragging palomino just back of the ridge and, dropping behind a big boulder, watched as the stage came rumbling along, gripping her drawn gun, thumb on its hammer. She was within good six-gun range of the road and, by allowing the stage to pass, she could open fire on the gang as it came tearing up, and stop them.

SHE slipped to a better vantage point on the rim, got down behind another big boulder. But she tripped over a man's booted feet in the dark. She choked off a cry, looked down. The man, clutching a Winchester, was looking up at her with amazed stare.

"Chip!" he cried in a hoarse whisper.

"Sandy!" burst out her startled answer. But her gun covered him like a flash. "You—you're lying here to—to—"

He reached out one hand to draw her down behind the rocks. But she leaped back, her gun ready to blaze.

"If you move a step," she cried, "I—I'll shoot! Drop that rifle, you—you outlaw!"

He ignored her threat. "How'd *you* get here, Chip?" came his low, hoarse query. "Lie down, for Gawd's sake, quick. Hell's gonna rip loose. The gang's meanin' to—"

Chip's voice held deep scorn. "Yes, and you're with them. I was riding to warn you that Dad and Shotgun are on that stage, heading for town to get the sheriff and a posse and trail you down—hang you. I told them about your blotting the brand on that calf and riding away with Holt. I saw you, heard what you said to him. I thought I couldn't see you caught, but now"—her blue eyes blazed—"I—I *can!*"

With the quickness of a panther he had her in his arms, had her gun twisted from her fingers. And then he swept her close and kissed her! His gray eyes glowed into her blue ones. She tried to fight, but was helpless against his strength.

"I love yuh, darlin'!" he murmured. "Keep tellin' yoreself that. But don't go to firin' yore gun or yuh'll mebbe spoil things."

Before she could reply, he gripped his rifle and went leaping down the hillside toward the stage.

"Stay where yuh are!" he called back. "I don't want th' gang tuh see yuh. They're hellions, Chip!"

More angry than she had ever been in her whole life, loathing him anew, Chip grabbed up her fallen gun and rushed down the hill behind him. But she could not shoot him because though she could hear him, she could not see him in the tall mesquite.

Then the stage came rumbling by the hill at a mad run. Coming on behind it at full speed, the outlaws started shooting. The driver pitched headlong from his seat, dropping the long lines, shot dead in that first rain of bullets. The frightened team bolted.

The guard on top of the stage started driving a storm of Winchester lead at the gang, and Chip saw two outlaws fall from their saddles. From inside the stage, two heads poked out from the open side windows, hands clutching six-guns, and more streaks of flame darted from muzzles. Chip's father and old Shotgun were fighting for their lives, inside a runaway stage!

And their shots took deadly toll. Another outlaw fell, and another's horse catapulted crashingly, crushing its rider.

A huge outlaw came toward Chip, his gun raised, his horse at a mad run. The roar of the man's shot seemed to tear her eardrums. But her own revolver blazed twice and the man collapsed in a heap under his leaping horse's iron hoofs. Only then was she conscious the outlaw's bullet had seared along her side. It stung viciously, but she was too excited to mind.

"WHERE'S Sandy?" her thoughts flashed, but she had no time to waste. Somebody must stop those runaway horses that were dragging the stage and her father and old Shotgun to certain destruction.

She grabbed the flying reins of a loose horse, flung into the saddle and tore after the stage at a wild run. Reaching the rear end of it she vaulted onto the boot with its load of baggage. Clawing her way to the top, she saw that the guard was in the driver's seat and trying to stop the team, but without the lines, which were trailing along beside the front right wheel.

Another instant and a rider in a new gray Stetson and a yellow shirt raced beside the team, swung down in his saddle, grabbed up the lines and then vaulted from saddle to driver's seat. Dragging with all his strength on the lines, he fought to control the team.

Sandy flung the lines over to the guard, grabbed out his six-gun and dropped to his knees on top of the stage. He drove a perfect rattle of deadly shots at the outlaws, and two more crashed headlong. Chip flattened beside Sandy and made her revolver fairly leap with the rapidity of her own fire. When another outlaw's horse fell the remaining three outlaws whirled away and went tearing back along the dusty road, to vanish in a canyon.

As swiftly as it had begun, all firing ceased. Back along the road lay the bodies of five of the outlaws, bloody heaps—and all wearing the black masks of the Holt gang. The guard was gradually getting the frightened team under control, but the stage still rocked dangerously over the rough ground. Chip suddenly gripped Sandy's arm as an unusually heavy jolt almost tossed her over the side of the stage. His arm swept about her and drew her back to safety. She looked up into his face. He was smiling grimly.

"Yuh killed Holt, Chip," he told her. "That big feller what rushed yuh. Good work."

She lay staring into his eyes. She had seen him firing furiously at the gang. What was the answer? Had all her doubts of him been crazy, or what?

"You—you weren't a member of the gang, Sandy?" she asked huskily, but all she could really think of was the strength in his arm that was holding her securely, his daring way in picking up the lines and boarding the stage, and its toll-taking shooting at the gang.

A low chuckle came from his lips. "Only for awhile, Chip," he said, and

grinned. "Jest long enough to locate their hangout and try—"

The guard now had the team down to a halt. Chip's father and old Shotgun clambered out the stage, still gripping their smoking six-guns. For a moment they did not see Chip and Sandy up on top.

"Dad!" Chip called down.

They looked up with astonished eyes. But when they saw Sandy, old Calhoun's gun leaped up and his face became hard and grim.

"Come down here, Sandy Blair, damn yuh!" her father ordered angrily. "Drop that rifle quick." The deadliness in his voice made Chip cold. She moved between the two.

But old Shotgun laid a hand on Calhoun's gun-arm, spoke softly.

"Hold yore fire, Boss," he advised. "Let's let Sandy talk first. Ain't no rush pluggin' him. The fight's over, and Holt's gang is cleaned up a-plenty. Come on down, Sandy, and speak yore piece."

COVERED by old Calhoun's gun, Sandy climbed down, Chip following him. Her mind felt utterly confused. Was Sandy an outlaw or not? Everything seemed a jumble to her.

She had seen him blot the brand on that Box O calf, had seen him ride away with Holt, had heard him propose a partnership with the man. And here he had saved all of those on the stage from almost certain death in the runaway, had driven hot lead at the gang when outlaws had fallen dead under his furious fire, and he had complimented her for killing Holt!

Nothing made sense. She stood studying his half smiling, dusty face wonderingly—while her heart pounded.

"Well, speak yore say-so, Blair," her father demanded. "Shotgun wants to give yuh a chance, and we will."

Sandy's gray eyes twinkled. "Well, Boss," he drawled, "it was jest thisaway. Shotgun and me planned to see what we could do about the Holt gang raisin' hell in our valley. I was to try gettin' Holt on my trail, then blot a brand on one of our calves so he'd catch me at it. Then I'd say I wanted in with him and his gang, and we'd rustle from you, me havin' the inside track. That way, I could get with the gang and wait my chance to send word back to Shotgun where the hangout was. Then you and him and a posse could come on and we'd land the whole gang.

"It all was workin' out fine. But when Holt and me got to the hideout the gang had jest heard this stage was luggin' twenty thousand and they was all bent on robbin' it, ready to start pronto. On our way up here I managed to slip away in the dark and rode around so's to get ahead of the stage and warn the driver and guard and stick with 'em." He grinned, eyeing Chip amusedly. "But I run onto Chip up on the hill an' she 'most spoiled things, tryin' to hold me up with a gun and tellin' me I was one of the gang. I had to act sorta rough with her for a minute."

Chip's eyes were shining now, her cheeks flushed. The wave of relief that swept her made her lean against his shoulder. But her father still glared, eyeing him keenly.

"Is what he say, so, Shotgun?" he snapped at his old foreman. "And you two been cookin' up things thisaway, without tellin' me?"

Old Shotgun chuckled. "Yuh'da throwed one of yore fits, Boss, and wouldn't never have allowed Sandy to run such risks as he's took for you and the Box O."

Old Calhoun's expression softened. He reached out his hand to Sandy, swung his other arm around the young man's shoulders. Their hands met in a hearty grip.

"Sandy, Sandy," the old cattleman confessed, "I oughta be bullsnaked, doubtin' yuh thataway. I'm askin' yuh to forgive—"

"Better let Sandy and Chip get

ridin' home, Boss," old Shotgun broke in, a strangely worried light in his eyes. "You and me and the guard's gotta load all these dead renegades on the stage and get to town and report to the sheriff. With the stage luggin' all that *dinero* in its strong box we better clear outa here."

"I reckon so, Shotgun," old Calhoun agreed. "Well, Chip, Sandy, git ridin' back home. We'll take care o' things here."

GETTING their horses, Chip and Sandy rode away. From a ridge, they looked back. The stage was traveling toward town, driven by the guard. They could not see the ghastly burdens in the baggage boot where lay all the dead outlaws but one. That body lay inside the stage, on the floor, and old Calhoun and Shotgun were staring down at the ashen face from pitifully sad eyes. For it was Ted, Calhoun's son!

"Sandy and me was suspicionin' things, Boss," old Shotgun said huskily, as the stage rumbled on. "Sandy was hopin' he'd find a way to save 'im without yore ever knowin'." He laid a gnarled hand on Calhoun's shoulder in sympathy.

"And now everybody'll recognize my boy when we get to town," old Calhoun moaned. "It'll break Chip's heart —like it's broke mine."

Shotgun looked out at the moonlit night. There was still almost an hour before full dawn. The canyons were still in shadow. Suddenly he leaned forward and spoke hoarsely.

"Boss, let's drop Ted right here, then go on to town with the other bodies and report. Won't never nobody expect to find Ted among these hellions. Then you an' me'll ride back here quick and bury him in these hills. We'll tell folks Ted's left the country, like he's been threatenin' to do. Chip needn't ever know. It'll be jest between you an' me." His voice grew huskier as he added, "An' Ted always love these old hills."

Silently, they lifted the body and allowed it to slip to the ground. The noise of the rumbling stage and the pounding hoofs of the team prevented the guard from hearing a sound. . . .

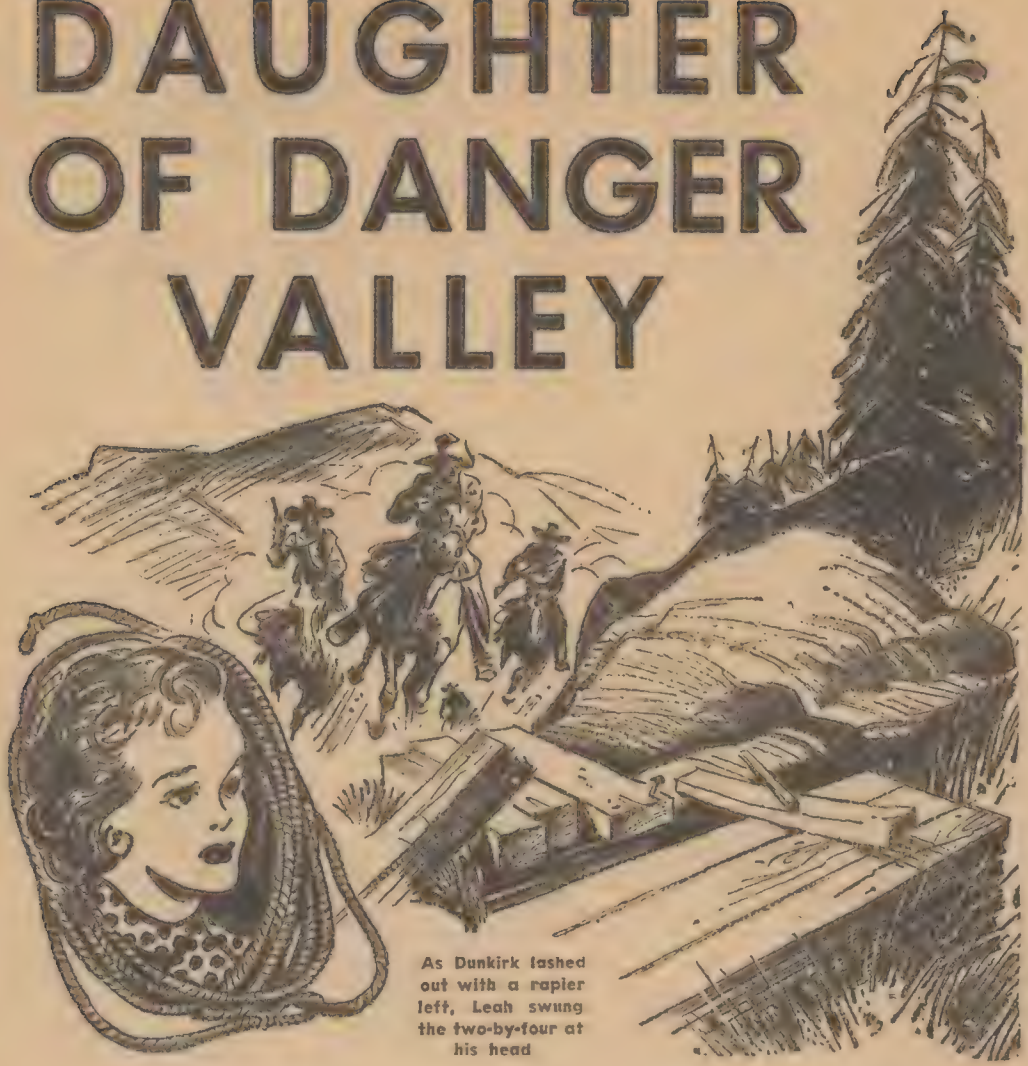
Two hours later, as dawn slowly broke over the range, two old men turned from a newly-made grave, mounted, and silently rode away for the Box O. One secret would remain in their stout old hearts forever.

At the same hour, Chip was resting in Sandy's arms over at the Box O, smiling up at him from glowing eyes. Over the desert and mountains, the first streaks of the new day were crimsoning the range with gold.

"Don't ever try altering a brand again, Sandy," she was laughing. "*My* brand will never come off you." Her voice became a soft whisper. "And I'll always wear yours in my heart."

"Branded by love," Sandy murmured, and then they were oblivious to everything but themselves.

DAUGHTER OF DANGER VALLEY



As Dunkirk lashed out with a rapier left, Leah swung the two-by-four at his head

CHAPTER I

Dam Trouble

A BAREHEADED rider on a leggy sorrel was traveling like an arrow shot from a bow along the precipitous edge of Danger River.

Leah Barrett rode straight up in the saddle, leaning easily as the sorrel took the curves. With her flashing black eyes and smooth black hair, she looked like a descendant of some proud old Hidalgo. Leah was the last of the fighting Barretts, and unless all the signs were wrong, each surging leap of the sorrel was taking her straight into the biggest fight of her young life.

Two weeks ago, an unidentified bushwhacker had murdered Lee Barrett, her father.

That murderer's bullet cut short Leah's education. She had hurried home, after three years at an Eastern university, to take over the manage-

To Carry on Her Father's Work, Leah

A Complete Novelet of a Range Girl's Courage

By
ROBERT E. OBETS

Author of "Under a Mexican Moon," "Heart Thief," etc.

ment of the large Bar B ranch with her father's partner, Harg Murdo.

Upon her return she discovered that the whole valley was hostile toward her. Men she had known all her life passed her by on the streets of Hermoso without speaking. Leah knew why they were antagonistic toward her.

It was the dam Lee Barrett had been building across the Danger River. The nearsighted fools, Leah thought. They couldn't visualize how much that dam would mean to the valley.

But no matter what, he was determined to finish that dam! Then, she would hunt down the man who had murdered her father. When she found him—

Suddenly Leah saw two horsemen blocking her path ahead. One of them tried to wave her down. He brought his white sombrero flashing down right in front of the sorrel's nose. The animal sat on its haunches and

Barrett Defies Ranchers and Outlaws!

came to a sudden stop, but Leah kept going.

She hit the ground hard in a sitting position. As she skidded to a halt, the sorrel leaped over her, stampeding down the trail.

"Go after him, Frank!" one of the men yelled. Then Frank was tearing after her runaway mount, while the other was helping her to her feet.

Leah jerked away from him. She wasn't hurt, yet she was quivering with anger—and the more she thought about her ungraceful fall the angrier she became.

She knew who the grinning ape was. He was the man who had bought out that Scotch Syndicate spread at the upper end of the valley. He called it the Union Jack. He wasn't really a cowman, she thought. She branded him as an adventurer, who had taken up ranching just for excitement. His full title was Lord Chauncey V. Dunkirk, III, but his men had cut that short. Because of his love for gambling, they called him "Chance." Chance Dunkirk.

HE WAS one of the few newcomers ever to make friends in Danger Valley. He was a born leader and his reckless, devil-may-care nature had a strong appeal for the wild-hearted cowboys of the valley. Yes, Leah decided, Chance Dunkirk was a man to reckon with.

Glancing up at him, despite her anger, she saw why. He was tall, almost gangling. He wasn't handsome—his mouth was too wide, his smile too crooked, and his eyes too gray. Still, there was a lazy, easy assurance about him that would draw men to him. Maybe, Leah conceded, some women too.

But he didn't have to grin at her that way—like some ten-year-old watching a circus baboon!

"Is this all you've got to do?" she snapped. "Go around scaring people's horses?" She gave his slim booted leg a vicious cut with her riding whip.

"I wanted to talk to you," he said lazily. "So I stopped you. How was I to know you were to be thrown off your horse? I'm sorry that happened, but—"

"Thrown? I *fell* off!"

Suddenly she flung up her riding crop and slashed down at his bronzed face.

The blow never landed. His hand shot out and clamped her wrist. Then Chance Dunkirk had possession of the whip and was gazing down at her. For the first time in her life, Leah wanted to run.

"Once, in Singapore," he said softly, "I kissed a young lady for trying that trick." He shrugged. "Well, I'm already late for that meeting, and since I still want to talk with you—"

Before Leah could guess his intention he swooped her up in his arms and carried her to his horse. She kicked and squirmed, but he only laughed and tightened his grip. He dumped her into the saddle, swung up behind and touched spurs to his big roan.

"Now we're even," he said. "So how about calling it off?"

"You're forgetting one little thing," she retorted. "It was you that started it. Anyone would know better than to try stopping a horse that way!"

Suddenly, the thought popped into her mind that maybe here was her chance to secure a strong ally. Her Bar B lay just above the neck of the bottle-shaped valley and Dunkirk's Flag was the first ranch below the Bar B. If trouble did break, the Flag would be in a buffer position. Besides, if Chance Dunkirk put in with her, most of the smaller ranchers would follow his lead.

She despised him, she told herself, yet all was fair in love and war.

Glancing up at him, she gave him her most appealing smile.

"Maybe I was too quick on the trigger," she murmured. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"For the present—that dam," he an-

swered soberly. "Folks are sore about it. But there's something behind all the trouble that's a lot deeper than that dam—something that threatens the whole valley. Tomorrow night I'm to meet a friend of mine across the Rio. Maybe, when I talk to Luis, I'll know more. This dam trouble and your father's death and your partner, Harg Murdo, they all tie up somehow. And I'm afraid this dam will be the spark that'll set the thing off. So I'm asking you to give it up."

"And suppose I don't?" she countered. "Would you be for me, or against me?"

"I never yet made war on a girl," he said slowly.

QUICKLY Leah turned around so that her eyes would not betray her triumph.

Leah paused in the doorway of the county judge's office, and with Chance Dunkirk at her elbow gazed at the grim-faced men crowded in the small room. Here were the leading ranchers of the valley; and as their hostility pushed out at her, Leah suddenly felt helpless, beaten. What could a girl do, single-handed, against a score of men?

Across the smoke-fogged room, she sighted Harg Murdo, and her confidence came back with a rush.

Here was a man to stick with, she thought. Nothing soft about that dark, hawk-beaked face or those bold black eyes. Nobody was going to push Harg Murdo around.

While these thoughts were flashing through Leah's mind, a squat, bearded fellow was haranguing the ranchers. Leah knew him to be Keno Drew, another newcomer to the Danger country.

She disliked the man on sight.

"Dammit," he was shouting, "the Barretts have lorded it over Danger Valley long enough. They've grabbed off all the best grazin' land, and now they want all the water. That's what it'll mean, once that dam goes across the Danger. And I for one ain't gonna stand for it!"

"Just what, Mr. Drew, are you going to do about it?"

Leah's scornful challenge jerked all heads toward the doorway where she stood with Chance Dunkirk.

"I tell yuh what I'd do," snarled Keno Drew. "I'd dish you out some o' the same dose yore paw got! You might wear skirts, but they ain't noways long enough for yuh to hide behind, yuh thievin'—"

Harg Murdo, his thin lips pulled into a tight, mirthless smile, leaped at Keno Drew. But Chance Dunkirk got to him first. The tall Englishman's right fist lashed out, landed against Drew's chin, slammed him backward. Drew slid to the floor and made no effort to rise.

In the short silence that fell, nobody seemed to notice Drew; all eyes were on Chance Dunkirk. Finally Tom Gates, who had been one of Lee Barrett's best friends, said:

"Before we go any further, Dunkirk, mebbe we better know which side you're on."

Dunkirk shrugged. "Drew forgot he was talkin' to a girl, that's all. As for how I stand—" He smiled at Leah. "Take the floor, Leah. Let's see what kind of case you make out for your dam."

She strode to the center of the room and faced the grim-eyed men.

"First, maybe I better remind you of a few things," she began, her voice steady, confident. "You seem to have forgotten just how much you owe the Barretts, what we've done for you and the valley. There are some in this room now who owe their lives to my mother. Who was it that nursed you during the smallpox epidemic? It was my mother! My mother who went into the quarantine camp, who contracted the disease and died, trying to save some of you!"

She paused, then went on.

"And then there was the Black Simmons gang. When the rustling

and killing got so bad that most of you were pulling up stakes to leave the valley, who was it that led the raid and wiped out that gang? It was my dad and my brother Larry, that's who! Larry was killed in that raid fighting for you and Danger Valley!

"And that's what I'm fighting for now. This dam will catch all the flood water when it rains in the hills. It will back water up in the bottle-neck for two or three miles. We'll all have water then, all year around, wet season or dry! That's why I'm going to finish that dam!"

An almost pleading look in her eyes, Leah gazed around at the uncertain faces. Heads began lowering, boots scraping the floor.

Then Chance Dunkirk spoke.

"Your dam would be a great thing for the valley—no question there, but you and Harg Murdo would have control over the whole valley then. What guarantee have we got that we'd get our fair share of the water? You and Murdo could clamp down, dry us out, ruin us. That's what we're afraid of. We're afraid that Harg Murdo is tryin' to get a strangle hold on Danger Valley."

Harg Murdo shoved up beside the girl. "So you're scared I'm buttin' in on yore own little game, eh, Dunkirk?" His voice was low, dangerous. "You're scared I'm tryin' to hog the valley, like you are. That it?"

"I'm talking to a lady right now, Murdo," was Dunkirk's careless answer. "When my time comes to talk to you, it probably won't be with my mouth."

Leah shifted her gaze from Chance Dunkirk's smiling face to the bold, mirthless features of Harg Murdo.

"Now, Leah, my plan is simple," Dunkirk said, ignoring Murdo. "We'll organize a water control board made up of valley ranchers. This board will determine the amount of water you let pass through your floodgates, and will see that each of us gets a fair share. If you'll agree to this, then we'll be assured of a square deal. We'll help you build that dam."

CHAPTER II

Stolen Cowpokes

LEAH studied him a moment. "On the face of it, it sounds all right," she said. "You'd get a square deal anyway, but I want you to be satisfied. I believe we can work this out."

"Listen, pardner," Murdo put in earnestly. "I'm for you—all the way. Don't let this guy pull the wool over yore eyes. Can't yuh see what this plan of Dunkirk's would mean? He controls most o' these weak-kneed lizards, and he'd control that water board, too. He'd get all the water, thataway! You and me would break ourselves buildin' that dam, and he'd get the benefit!"

Leah searched Dunkirk's face, but his sardonic smile told her nothing. Abruptly she made her decision.

"Dunkirk—you men—listen!" she said ringingly, and there was something in her voice that commanded attention. "Murdo and I are spending our money to build this dam and we're building it for the entire valley. But we're not going to build it, then give you absolute control! You'll have to trust me to give you the same fair deal the Barretts have always given you. That's final!"

Keno Drew rose to his feet.

"We see through yuh," he cried. "Yuh're a range hog like yore dad!"

"Drew's right!" another shouted, and others took up the cry. Like a grass fire fanned by a stiff breeze, anger flared in the close-packed room.

Hurt stabbed through Leah and she began to see red. "You can all go to the devil!" she blazed. "I'm going to build that dam, and you can't stop me! Unless you bushwhack me like you did dad!"

"C'mon, men!" yelled Drew. "I know one way to stop her! That half a dam that's built won't last half a minute with a few sticks o' dynamite under it!"

Mob spirit seethed through the room. Yelling and cursing, those lawless men of Danger Valley moved in a body toward the door.

It was Chance Dunkirk, standing there with the mirthless smile on his lips, who stopped them.

"Wait!" he commanded, barring the door. "You're right! No one person can control our water. But you're headin' for trouble. Let's do this my way!" They kept moving forward. "Listen! I'll make you a sporting proposition!"

The mob paused. Chance Dunkirk would gamble on anything. What was it now? Swiftly Chance said: "For a long time now you fellows been wantin' to build a race track and rodeo grounds here in Hermoso. But money being so tight with the draught and all, it looks like the deal is off. Here's my proposition. I'll guarantee to stop Leah from building her dam. If I don't stop her, I'll build you a track and a rodeo second to none, and it won't cost you a dime. If I should fail to stop her, you can still use that dynamite—and I'll be with you on it."

THE men looked at each other, questioningly. Finally old Tom Gates drawled.

"Hell's fire, gents, I can't see how we can lose. Let's give Chance a try at it." He looked quizzically at Dunkirk. "Jest how is it you're aimin' to stop Miss Leah?"

"That's my worry," Chance said. "Maybe I'll marry her."

That drew a laugh. Soon, men were drifting out the door.

Leah turned her attention to Dunkirk. Her first shock at discovering that he, along with the others, was against her had given way to a cold rage.

Standing beside Harg Murdo, Leah was watching the crew of Mex construction hands down in the dry bed of the Danger River. Nearby, on the brink of the precipitous river bank, a concrete mixer was working. From the mixer a spidery wooden chute led down to the far end of the steadily lengthening dam, where the laborers were using long sticks to puddle the fresh concrete into a form.

All day Leah had been wondering how Chance Dunkirk intended to stop her from building the dam. What would happen, she asked herself, when Dunkirk and Harg Murdo really locked horns?

The roar of six-guns, the whine of lead, sudden death—those were the

things open war would bring. And Leah was afraid. Afraid because already the storm clouds were gathering, and this time it wouldn't be the men of Danger Valley against a gang of outlaws; it would be the whole valley against the Bar B—against her and Harg Murdo.

Murdo's deep-toned voice shattered her thoughts.

"We got to get this job through before the fall rains. We're going to—and I jest hope Dunkirk tries to stop us!"

"I never try to do things, Murdo," drawled a soft voice from behind them. "I make it a habit to finish what I start."

Murdo whirled; Leah turned more slowly. Chance Dunkirk stood there gravely watching them. Behind him, a half-dozen Flag waddies sat their horses. The noise of the concrete mixer had blanketed their approach.

At the sight of the grinning Flag men Leah's anger raged. Now she knew what had become of Frank Stevens and the rest of the old Bar B

crew. Somehow, while she had been in the East, Dunkirk had persuaded these top-hands to work for him.

"The best cowpokes in Texas," her dad had often bragged—and Dunkirk had stolen them!

"How do you manage to keep these snakes?" asked Leah scornfully. "You must pay double wages and give them whiskey, besides."

The Flag riders stiffened. Frank Stevens, his square face tightening, kneed his bronc forward.

"Nobody but you, Miss Leah, could get away with that," he said hotly. "We ain't ridin' for no outfit yore pardner Murdo, there, has any part of, and we ain't ridin' for no range hoggin' outfit."

Her eyes flashing, Leah started a hand toward the .38 at her slim thigh. Murdo pushed in front of her.

"Hold it, pardner," he cautioned. "Dunkirk's turned these men against us. No use talkin' to them. Besides, we're outnumbered."

DUNKIRK turned. "All right, Frank," he told his foreman. "You boys get on home."

Grumbling, the six Flag riders wheeled their broncs and roared away. Dunkirk gazed mockingly at Harg Murdo.

"The odds are even now, Murdo. I came over to have a little talk with your Mexican hands. Any objections?"

A cold gleam flickered in Murdo's eyes. "How yuh want my objections, Dunkirk? With fists, knives, or six-guns?"

"Wait!" Leah pushed between them. "This won't help—"

Dunkirk courteously thrust her aside. As he was turning back to face Murdo, the Bar B man let go with a smashing right that might have ended the fight before it started. But Dunkirk weaved aside, drove his left fist into his opponent's middle. Murdo grunted, gave ground, then charged Dunkirk like a bull charging a red rag. After that it was smashing power against skill and whiplash speed; Murdo ever boring in, with Dunkirk dancing clear, weaving, feinting, ripping out with rapier lefts.

Leah, watching, was blazing mad. Dunkirk had come here to steal her hands and now he had picked a fight with her partner!

She grabbed up an odd end of two-by-four and began to circle the panting, milling pair. She saw an opening and put all her weight into a downward blow.

The flat side of the two-by-four crashed against the top of Dunkirk's head. Apparently blinded by the blow, he turned half around, his knees sagging. Even as he went to the ground, he kept lashing out, trying blindly to hit Murdo.

Leah saw the fist drive toward her. But too late. She tried to leap aside. Something hammered her forehead, and then the back of her head hit the ground. She lay there, stunned, until she heard a bunch of horses come pounding up.

When she got weakly to her feet, she saw Murdo holding a bandanna to his eye, saw Dunkirk pushing himself up from the ground. Just behind them a half-dozen Bar B riders were swinging down. With quick fear striking through her, she watched them silently push forward.

In the lead was "Gotch" Ansell, the new foreman of the Bar B—a gangling man with an Adam's apple that stuck out on his scrawny neck like a dry gourd on a vine. At his heels was "Weary" Snead, the new *segundo*, short, bandy-legged, droopy-eyed. They had their six-guns out.

These men, even though they worked for her, were strangers to Leah.

She knew that murderous gleam in their slitted eyes.

"Get up on yore laigs, Dunkirk," snarled Gotch Ansell. "Us Bar B rannies don't know but one cure for a skunk that hits a girl!"

CHAPTER III

Chombo Gantt

DUNKIRK stared around at the ring of men and the contemptuous smile curved his lips. His gray eyes came to rest on Harg Murdo.

"I didn't hit her on purpose," he said. "You know that, Murdo. But one excuse is good as another, isn't it? Your lady friend here will tell folks how I tried to kill her, and you'll get by with this murder you're planning. With me dead, you think you'll be safe, don't you, Murdo? You think nobody else is onto you. Well, you're wrong. But I won't delay the party by givin' you the details now." Turning his gaze on Leah, he added. "I'm just wondering how you fit into this. Maybe you're worse than Murdo."

"Talkin' almighty big for a man that's about to die, ain't yuh, Dunkirk?" Ansell grated. The hammer of his Colt clicked back. Then Leah found her voice.

"You're not going to kill him!" she cried. Her hand whipped to her .38. "Put that gun up, Ansell—all of you! I give the orders here, and there won't be any murder!"

For an instant all eyes were upon the girl and in that instant Chance cleared his .45. He rammed its muzzle into Murdo's side, hard.

"Now, Murdo," he rapped, "tell those gunhawks of yours to drop their hardware. Pronto!"

He eared back his Colt—and Murdo gave the order. Cursing, Ansell and the others obeyed.

"All right," Chance snapped. "Now, line up, single file. That's it! Now, march! One-two, one-two, one-two!" Snapping out orders in crisp military fashion, he sent the Bar B crew marching to the concrete chute at the brink of the river bank. But there Weary Snead, who was first in the line, hesitated.

"Say, Dunkirk!" he quavered. "You can't do this—yuh can't make us go down that chute. You'll kill us!"

Dunkirk's Colt, for a split second, swung away from Murdo, spoke once. Speed's sombrero gave a jerk—and he left the bank in a headlong dive. He hit the chute flat on his belly, and shot downward. The chute was leveling off, almost at its end, before Snead's clutching hands gripped the slick sides and brought himself to a stop. He flopped from the chute to the ground and lay there, frightened.

When the last Bar B man had sped down the chute, Dunkirk holstered his six-gun and stepped around in front of Harg Murdo.

"I think I ought to put you down there, too, Murdo," he said. "But I won't—not this time."

"Just try it," said Murdo quietly.

"You've got guts," Dunkirk told him. "And a brave man should never look foolish." He glanced at Leah. "Maybe I was wrong about you," he said. "Maybe you're not in with Murdo, after all. But that won't keep me from some day havin' to kill him."

The crew of Mexicans that had been working down in the river bed came running around the little supply shed.

"*Mira! El Ventura!*" one of them yelled. "Look! The Chance-taker!"

JABBERING excitedly, they circled about him. Angrily, Leah pushed into the center of the group.

"Don't you stop work!" she yelled. "Get back on the job or I'll fire every last one of you!"

Leah had heard that the Mexicans fairly worshiped Chance Dunkirk and now she had evidence that they did. The Mexicans ignored her.

"*Hola,* Jaime," Dunkirk greeted a slim youth. "What went with that five pesos I loaned you? I bet most of it went to buy that new *mantilla* I saw that pretty senorita of yours wearing!"

Dunkirk laughed and all the Mexicans joined him.

"And there's Francisco!" he said, spying an oldster with a face like old saddle leather. "You wouldn't think that *viejo* could still ride, would you? He's the best horseman in the valley—even if it did cost me a new saddle to learn he could top a bronc that I couldn't!"

And so it went. One by one he singled them out, while brown faces broke into delighted grins.

Leah was furious. She knew what was coming next and knew that she was powerless to stop it.

"You men don't know what this dam will mean to the valley," Dunkirk was saying. "Our cows will die, our grass wither." He shrugged. "But of course, you need the work. Well, *adios, amigos.* If you see any men that need jobs, tell them I'm stretching some new fence on the Union Jack."

The Mexicans went into a huddle. Then old Francisco stepped up to Dunkirk.

"We work for you, Senor *Ventura,*" he said simply.

"You can't quit me this way!" Leah burst out. She turned on Murdo. "Do something! Don't just stand there!"

"I know Mexicans," said Murdo. "And I know when I've lost a hand. But the game ain't finished yet—not by a long shot."

Dunkirk swung onto his roan, and looking down at Leah's flushed face he said:

"I hope you get some more hands soon. I need a big crew of wire stretchers."

"Just set foot on the Bar B again!" she cried. "Just try it!"

"When you get mad," he murmured, "you make me want to—"

Swiftly he leaned down and kissed her full on the lips.

Too shocked to move, she was still standing there when he rode away.

"Darn him," she whispered, "darn him. He's just a man."

It was dark when Leah got back from her hurried trip to town. There was still a stubborn set to her jaw, but her slim shoulders sagged with weariness. She had combed Hermoso from one side to the other looking for hands, but the Mexicans had met her with blank faces and meaningless shrugs. They wouldn't work for her. Chance Dunkirk had bribed them, she thought, or scared them.

It wouldn't do any good to bring in Mexicans from outside, either. As soon as they learned the situation, they'd quit, too. And of course the ranchers were all against her. What could she do? Curl up and quit? Like thunder! Dunkirk wasn't going to lick her this easy.

IT WAS after supper, though, before Leah hit upon a possible solution to her problem, and she owed her idea to Harg Murdo. Feeling lonely and depressed, she was staring past her outstretched legs into the cold fireplace when, without knocking, Murdo strode into the big front room. Startled, Leah leaped to her feet.

"What is it?" she asked sharply. Then: "Oh, it's you, Harg. I'm glad you're here. Dunkirk pulled a slick one on us. Not a Mex in Hermoso will work—"

"I knew they wouldn't, after Dunkirk got to them," Murdo cut in. "That's why I took a private trip on my own. He ain't got us licked yet."

He held a match to a quirly, and Leah found his dark eyes studying her. Somehow those bold eyes seemed softer; and the thought came to her that here was the best and almost the only friend she had in the whole valley.

"There's one bet Dunkirk overlooked," Murdo went on. "I know where we can hire a crew that Dunkirk couldn't scare. But first I want to know how you—feel about that Englishman. This afternoon when he kissed yuh, I sorta—well, I thought yuh didn't mind. If yuh love that jasper—"

"I despise him," Leah said fiercely.

"If you can show me a way to beat him, Harg, I'll be in your debt for life."

"That's all I wanted to know—for now," said Murdo softly. "Now, listen. Dunkirk and a friend o' his across the Rio, called Luis, are stealin' the valley blind. Dunkirk rustles the stuff, pushes it to Mexico, then this Luis shoves it on up the river and sells it back to ranchers on this side.

"I know this is true, Leah; yore dad did, too. We set a spy in Orejana to watch this Luis. This spy actually seen Dunkirk turn rustled beef over to Luis and his men. We knew this, but had no proof that would stand in court. That's why yore dad was killed. Dunkirk knew yore dad was onto him, and either killed pore Lee or had him killed. Now he's out to get me.

"He knows I'm carryin' on where yore dad left off. That's where I've been while you was in town. To Orejana, contactin' this spy yore dad and me hired. Leah, you've heard of Chombo Gantt, I reckon?"

"Chombo Gantt!" Leah gasped. "He's the one that raided Barrel Springs; burned and looted the town, carried off the girls! You don't mean dad and you hired that killer?"

"Exactly! He's our spy. Yuh see, no ordinary person could do any good on this job yore dad and me figgered out. Dunkirk and his runnin' mate, Luis, are tough. So we hired a tough hombre to spy on them. We hired Chombo Gantt! He done the job, too. He told me tonight he'd even helped Luis sell some o' the wet cows!

"And listen, Leah. Gantt says he can bring a crew over here that'll finish that dam for us pronto. Think of it, Leah! The whole valley's laughin' at us now over what Dunkirk pulled when he stole our hands. But with Gantt on our side, the laugh would be on Dunkirk. I hate to bring those hellions over here bad as you do, but we got to, pardner! What do yuh say?"

CHAPTER IV

Death Trap

SHE reached a sudden decision. Murdo was right. The valley was laughing, laughing at her when she'd even mortgaged the Bar B in order to build that dam. Laughing at her when she was wrenching her heart out trying to help them.

"Good work, Harg," she commended. "When will Gantt get here?"

"They're ready now. But there's one hitch. You're the boss here, yuh know, and Gantt won't cross the river till he talks to you, personal. I'm not askin' yuh to do this, pardner. Orejana is the worst hell-hole on the Border. Even with me lookin' after yuh, it'll be dangerous for you to go there. So it's yore say—and I almost hope yuh say no."

"Give me five minutes to get ready," Leah said.

Orejana lay five miles south of the Rio Grande. It was a refuge for outlaws and killers of every stripe. Even the daring *rurales* stayed clear of the place. Chombo Gantt, with his slanting green eyes, his killer heart and his snubbed-down .45s, was the boss of that hell-roaring town. His hangout was the *Cantina del Perro Rojo*—the Canteen of the Red Dog. Despite its fancy name, Leah Barrett soon discovered that the Red Dog was just another low-down Border dive.

Men stopped their drinking to stare at her as Murdo led her across the barroom. Their glittering eyes, lust-filled and bold, burned with desire, and Leah was frightened. Still, she couldn't help noticing the tall, darkly handsome fellow at the far end of the bar.

He was clad in black velvet, his short jacket embroidered with silver; pearl-handled .45s sagged from crossed gunbelts at his slim waist, and he wore a faint, delighted smile as he watched her. Most men, Leah thought,

would have looked ridiculous in such a get-up, but this one only looked dashing—and dangerous.

He reminded her, somehow, of Chance Dunkirk. There was the same atmosphere of devil-may-care recklessness about him.

"Santa Maria," he murmured, as she passed him. "A wild rose come to this devil's hell!"

Who was he? Could he be Dunkirk's friend Luis? He might be an outlaw, but she'd bet he was a gentleman.

Angrily Leah caught up her racing thoughts. She didn't know a thing about him, she told herself. Maybe he was the worst killer of the lot. But she wasn't frightened any more—not much.

Harg Murdo led her through a short hallway, past several closed doors, and stopped at a door at the end of the passage. He listened a moment, then knocked. The door swung inward and a giant of a man stood there gazing out of slanted, half-shut green eyes—gazing intently at Leah.

"Ah, Miss Barrett," he said silkily. "Chombo Gantt seldom has the pleasure of seeing one so beautiful in this poor *posada*. Step inside, please, and we will talk over this little business my good friend Murdo has told me about."

Feeling the impact of those green eyes upon her, Leah stepped past him into the room. There was a lamp burning on a washstand in one corner, a bare pine table, a couple of rawhide-bottomed chairs—nothing else.

"My partner could have completed these arrangements," she said, talking to cover her nervousness. "Mr. Murdo told me—"

TURNING to face the door, she stiffened. She had thought Murdo was right behind her. Instead, he was in the hallway, and Chombo Gantt was barring the door with his massive arms.

"Get yourself a drink or something, Murdo," Gantt ordered. "I want to talk to Miss Barrett—private."

Leah's hand flashed to her .38, but Murdo flashed her a warning glance.

"You ain't tryin' any tricks on my pardner," he growled at Gantt. "You'll talk to the two of us, or not at all."

Gantt shrugged. "Have it your own way. Come in, and we'll get down to business." He stood back from the door.

"That sounds better," said Murdo, and stepped inside.

"It is better!" Without warning, Gantt's hand flashed up, gripping a blued Colt. The Colt barrel caught Murdo just above his temple and smashed him to the floor. He lay there motionless.

Deliberately Gantt reached behind him, pulled the door shut and slid the bolt home.

Fear raced through Leah, and she whipped out her .38. But Gantt was too quick for her. His big fist shot out, grasped her wrist, twisted hard, and the .38 clattered to the floor.

Leah kicked out viciously. Her booted toe connected with Gantt's shin. He cursed, momentarily loosed his grasp on her wrists. She jerked away from him and tried to scoop her gun from the floor. But Gantt was after her like a huge pouncing cat.

She was trapped! Trapped here with a mad man! Even if she could get out of this room, it wouldn't help her.

Those killers in the barroom would hunt her down!

His heavy face filled with rage, Chombo Gantt was closing in, driving her into a corner. She grabbed up a chair, and with desperate strength hurled it at that leering face. He ducked, leaped aside. He hit the washstand and overturned the lamp. For an instant all was dark, then smoky yellow flames were licking upward from the floor.

Gantt snarled and lunged toward her. But in that moment of darkness

Leah had retrieved her gun and now it was leveled at Gantt's stomach.

"Stand back!" she rapped. She put a hand behind her and felt for the door bolt.

The flames were spreading rapidly along the pine floor. Already tongues of red were licking at the table behind Gantt. Desperate, he kept moving forward, ignoring Leah's .38.

Her lips tightened. Above the crackle of flames the sharp bark of her gun sounded. Gantt clapped a hand to his thigh where the bullet had stung him, and ripped out a curse.

Leah nodded toward Harg Murdo, who was beginning to stir on the floor. "Pick him up. Pronto!"

From up front came shouts, the pound of boots. Colts began roaring. Grinning slyly now, Chombo Gantt took Murdo under the arms and dragged him toward the door.

Leah's hand found the door bolt, shot it back and pulled the door inward. She backed into the hallway. By the light of the hanging lamp, she saw a mass of men surging toward her from the barroom. The fancy-dressed fellow she had noticed as she entered the *cantina* was in the lead.

There was no escape from this corridor of death. Leah lifted her six-gun and moved forward.

SUDDENLY, then, she saw the fancy-dressed fellow whirl in mid-stride. His silvered Colts blurred, became flashing pinwheels in the dim light as he threw down on the onrushing outlaws.

"Back, my fine *amigos!*" he yelled. "Luis de Madero, he fight for the rose, nevair for the skonk!"

Faintly, Leah heard a sound behind her. She whirled, saw Chombo Gantt standing over Murdo's prostrate body, whipping up his .45. The gun spoke and spoke again. Leah realized that Gantt wasn't shooting at her but at Luis de Madero, Dunkirk's friend, who had come so unexpectedly to her aid. Luis was between two fires now. The only reason Gantt hadn't already downed him was that she was in the line of fire and for some reason Gantt didn't want to kill her.

Leah lifted her .38, began blasting away at Chombo Gantt.

"All right, you asked for it!" he roared, and pointed his Colt at her.

At this short range, Gantt couldn't miss, Leah thought. Crazy thoughts flitted through her mind, thoughts of Chance Dunkirk. Could he be a murderer, as Murdo claimed?

Gantt's big Colt was steadying for the kill. Leah took careful aim. Her one chance was to down Gantt before he dropped her. She couldn't remember if she'd shot five times or six!

"In here, Leah!" some one yelled.

The thunder of a Colt nearly deafened her, and she saw Gantt jerk convulsively, toss away his .45 and grab at his bullet-torn throat. He fell across Harg Murdo's legs. Murdo, in a sitting position now, shook his head as if to clear it. Chombo Gantt didn't move. He was dead.

But Leah wasn't thinking about Gantt. She was thinking that the man who had saved her was—Chance Dunkirk.

A powerful arm hooked around her waist and swept her into a side room. She glanced up, and in the half darkness she saw the faintly smiling face of Chance Dunkirk.

"Oh, Chance," she breathed. "You might have been killed."

Her knees buckled and she swayed against him. From the hall came a fresh burst of shots, then the taunting voice of Luis.

"Why you wait, my fine *compadres?* My gons, they get hongry."

"In here, Luis—it's me, Captain Dunkirk!" Chance called, and began dragging Leah toward the window.

An English lord, a rancher—now a captain, she thought wonderingly. Then she remembered Harg Murdo.

"Harg—my partner," she gasped. She jerked free and ran to the door.

Murdo, weaving drunkenly, was at

the closed end of the hall blasting away at the advancing outlaws. His .45 was clutched in both hands. As Leah watched him, Luis ducked into the doorway beside her and hurriedly began reloading his smoking Colts.

"I am believe," he murmured, "the dog that fight and ron away, she live to fight some other day. *Caramba,* but she is get hot in this place!"

Leah wasn't listening to him. "I'm coming, Harg!" she cried. "Hang and rattle, pardner!"

CHAPTER V

Dunkirk's Strange Ally

A BIG hand clutched her shoulder, yanked her back inside the room.

"You little fool, you'll get killed," growled Dunkirk. "Come on, Luis, let's chase these sidewinders."

Shoulder to shoulder, they stepped out into the hallway. While Leah reloaded, she breathed a little silent prayer that Fate would keep those two brave men, Chance Dunkirk and Luis de Madero, safe.

Leah didn't think they could do it, but they did. They drove those kill-mad outlaws the length of the hallway. In that narrow passage the outlaws got in each other's way fighting to get clear of those deadly Colts, until finally they crowded frantically through the barroom door.

Then Dunkirk had Leah by the arm and was dragging her across the dark room, while Luis helped Murdo along behind them. They dropped one by one out the window to the ground. Dunkirk pulled Leah into the wall shadows and lifted her onto his waiting roan. Luis, who had run around the corner, came back leading three more horses.

"Me, I am think I ron faster on foot," he apologized. "But these the first horse I see."

Then they were pounding away. As they rounded the corner the outlaws boiled from the front door, six-guns yammering. A few slugs whined harmlessly past their ears.

They reined in on the Texas bank. Dunkirk, his face severe in the white moonlight, glared at Leah.

"Blame it," he growled, "you ought to have better sense than to go in that hell-hole! S'pose I hadn't been due to meet Luis there tonight?" His eyes narrowed. "Just what were you doing in Chombo Gantt's hangout, anyhow?" he demanded.

Leah had been wondering how she could thank him for saving her life. But now her anger flared.

"I went to see Gantt," she said shortly. "I went to hire his gang to take the place of the hands you stole. I failed, but I'll finish that dam if I have to kill you, Chance Dunkirk!"

Luis was staring at Leah with open admiration. "What a peppery one! And to think Luis de Madero is fight such a one."

At his words, a brilliant idea popped into Leah's mind.

"You know, Luis, you don't have to fight me," she said softly. "You could fight with me. I need a man like you, now that Harg is hurt. What do you say?"

Leah, glancing aside at Dunkirk, saw him smile.

"Luis never could resist a pretty face," Dunkirk said. "He might put in with you, but I don't think your friend Murdo would like that. Luis and I, we know too much about him, eh, Murdo?"

Murdo had been bandaging his slashed scalp with a bandanna, apparently paying no attention to the talk. Now he looked at Dunkirk and his lips thinned.

"You saved my bacon tonight, Dunkirk," Murdo grated. "Besides, I'm not in shape to buck you now. So I guess yore talk will stand, for the time bein'. As for Luis—well, my pardner knows I'm for her till the cows come home, and if she wants to

take a chance on him, I'm for her there!"

"I knew you'd feel that way!" said Leah. "And forget tonight, Harg. It wasn't your fault our plans went wrong."

She smiled at Luis. "Well?"

"It gives me the great sorrow, *mi capitan,*" he murmured. "But to the pretty girl, Luis de Madero have nevair learn to say no."

SHORTLY after sunup next morning with her new ally, Luis, riding beside her, Leah headed for town. With the dashing Spaniard to help her, she intended making another attempt to hire some men. She had little hope of success, but she didn't know of anything else to do.

Where the trail skirted the north fringe of the Union Jack they came upon old Francisco and his brown-skinned crew digging a row of post holes.

"What you digging those holes for, Francisco?" Leah asked. "For the Flag horses to break their legs in?"

The old Mexican looked up and grinned. "No, señorita. Senor Dunkirk is building here a trap for the horses. Who knows, some day he may use it."

Leah heard a horse coming on at a gallop, and turning in the saddle she saw Dunkirk. He reined in and, as she pulled her horse around to face him, he gave her a flashing grin. He spoke first to Luis.

"Tryin' tricks with my hands, huh?" he drawled. "I always thought I should have left you and your broken leg in the jungle. You would have made a swell feast for old Waromi and his blacks!"

Luis grinned back at Dunkirk. "Did I not save you from the white wall and the blindfold?"

Then they were laughing, and Leah couldn't understand it. These two had fought together, had saved each other from death, and now they were laughing and fighting on opposite sides. But was Luis really on her side?

Dunkirk seemed to sense her bewilderment. "Don't worry about Luis," he told her. "If it comes to it, he'll use his guns against me. Fighting is in our blood. We can't help it. Luis won't hold it against me if I have to shoot him."

"But me," said Luis, "I am begin to think pairhaps we don' shoot each other."

"Yeah," agreed Dunkirk. "And I'm beginning to think I was all wrong about Leah here." He gave her an intent look. "Leah, would you answer a question for me? It's a personal question, but I've got good reasons for asking it. If you give me the right answer, I might send Francisco and his bunch back to work in the morning. How about it?"

"To keep the work going on, I'd answer almost anything," she said.

"All right, here it is," he said quickly. "Do you intend to marry Harg Murdo? Would you even consider it?"

Leah reddened, but her answer came instantly. "How could I marry him when I'm not in love with him?"

"Thanks," Dunkirk said softly. "And now one other thing. How about you and I having a long talk? Say, tonight?"

"Doors are never locked at the Bar B," she told him, "if you've got the nerve to come there."

The night was chilly and there was a threat of storm in the air. Leah had built a fire in the fireplace, but its cheery blaze failed to still her remorse. So many things had gone wrong today.

SHE and Luis had failed in their attempt to hire more hands. And on top of that, Luis had disappeared and Harg Murdo had ridden off in an ugly mood, taking all the Bar B riders with him. The possible consequences of Murdo's anger was what was worrying her the most.

Tonight he had surprised her, almost shocked her, by asking her to marry him. She had answered him as gently as possible, but he had taken it hard.

"It's that damned Englishman," he had declared, and then had gathered the men and ridden away.

Where had he gone? And what did he intend to do? Murdo was a violent man. He might even kill Chance Dunkirk!

At that thought Leah leaped to her feet. She started for the back door, intending to saddle up and warn Dunkirk. Then she heard a light step cross the front porch. Swiftly she went to the door. It was Dunkirk.

"I didn't think you'd come," she told him, all in a rush. "I'm glad to see you!"

He laughed. "I thought you would be," he said lightly. "And I can tell you why."

After he had settled down beside her in front of the fireplace, he abruptly became serious.

"I've almost decided to call off my side of this fight," he said, keeping his eyes on her face. "Since I've come to know you better, I know you couldn't have any part in a shady deal. Murdo, of course, is different. But after what you told me this morning, that you're not in love with him, I can't see how he's going to get control of this dam. And that's the one thing I was afraid of."

He leaned forward. "Surely, you know he's a crook. I've been watching him a long time and I've positive proof he's behind all the trouble and the rustling that's been going on. Somehow, he persuaded your dad to sell him an interest in the Bar B. Then he had your dad killed—just like he will you, if he finds you won't marry him.

"He wants control of the whole valley, but first he has to get control of the Bar B and the dam. With the dam, he could force the rest of us out. He's been rustling on the side to get a little ready cash. He and Chombo Gantt were together on that." His eyes searched hers. "You believe me, don't you, Leah?"

Leah's mind was in a whirl. A man with the nerve and the sporting blood Dunkirk had shown simply couldn't be a crook. But on the other hand, there was the word of her partner, Harg Murdo.

"I can't see Murdo as bad as you paint him," she said. "He—he loves me. He asked me to marry him—asked me tonight."

Booted feet came pounding up to the front door. "Boss! Boss, yuh in there?" a voice yelled. The door flew inward and Dunkirk's foreman, Frank Stevens, came barging in.

"Chance! It's them Bar B hellions—Murdo an' his crew! They set fire to all the Flag buildin's! Reckon they seen all our boys in town, so they sneaked over and done it. Me an' Jingle was out keepin' an eye peeled for rustlers, like yuh told us, an' seen the blaze. When we got there it was too late. The big bunch of skunks was leavin'. Murdo, Snead, Gotch Ansell—the whole pack. They split up. Part's goin' for that beef herd in the south pasture, an' part's headin' here. Be here in a coupla winks! I circled through the brush an' rode like hell in a hurry!"

LEAH was confused.

"So it's showdown," Dunkirk gritted grimly. "Murdo fired my place to draw all the valley men there. That'll give him a chance to make a clean sweep in the valley proper. When Leah wouldn't marry him, it drove him to a showdown. Come on!"

He hit toward the door. But halfway there he whirled. His glance stabbed at Leah.

"Why didn't I think of it!" he groaned. "You knew I wouldn't be home. You told me to come here. Nobody but you and Luis knew that—and I trust Luis. If you're behind this, you're the most contemptible—"

For the second time that night the front door abruptly flew inward. Harg Murdo, with Gotch Ansell, Weary Snead, and a half dozen others crowding behind him, came rushing in.

"We done what yuh told us, pardner!" panted Murdo. "We fired the Flag, and the rest is runnin' off that beef—Dunkirk! By damn, I been lookin' for you!" A .45 appeared in his hand. "You tin-horn lord, this is all for you!" He thumbed back the hammer of his Colt.

Dunkirk, his thin lips curved in contempt, was gazing steadily at Leah.

"So you are in with him," he said harshly. "You're the lowest specimen of girl I ever met."

Leah was shocked, hurt. "Oh, Chance, it's all a mistake," was all she could say. "I tell you—"

"Don't add lying to your sins," he cut in coldly, and right under Murdo's dead drop he went for his Colt. At the same time, he yelled, "Frank! Hit for town and bring the boys!"

Frank Stevens leaped toward the rear door. He never reached it. Murdo's .45 swung in a short arc. The room shook to a thundering roar. Drilled between the shoulders, Stevens went down.

Without a glance for the man he had killed, Murdo swung his .45 back to cover Dunkirk. Dunkirk's own weapon was just clearing leather. Murdo already was triggering for the kill.

Again the room shook to a jarring roar. Amazed, Leah saw Murdo's gun jerk from his hand. Whirling, she saw Luis, a smoking Colt in his slim hand, crouched in the doorway which Frank Stevens had tried so vainly to reach.

"Up with the hand, Senor Murdo," he purred. "Careful, Weary!"

His Colt bellowed, and Weary Snead howled and dropped his half-drawn six-gun. He clapped his bleeding fingers to his mouth.

As Dunkirk and Leah were edging up the wall toward Luis, the Spaniard's Colt roared a third time. Gotch Ansell went down with a gurgling cry. Then, all over the room, guns were clearing leather.

Luis emptied his Colt at the massed men, and, as Dunkirk and Leah slid through the doorway behind him, he leaped backward and yanked the door shut. Lead beat like hailstones against the solid wood.

"They can't get away!" came Murdo's yell. "Weary, you and Mex and Dahl block the hill trail. The rest of us'll cut 'em off from town. We'll hem 'em in against the Danger!"

Leah, leading the two men through the dark ranchhouse, was afraid. The odds were too great to beat.

"This is something!" sounded Luis' voice through the darkness. "A good thing I am come back to see what this Murdo he is up to. Now we are together. We shake the devil by the hand, and pairhaps we take this Murdo along, too, eh?"

CHAPTER VI

Success—and Love

QUICKLY, then, Leah felt ashamed for her moment of weakness. What more, she thought, could a girl ask than to die fighting beside the man she loved?

Leah knew she would never forget this night. Not because she was to die soon, but because now, when it was too late, she realized that she loved Chance Dunkirk. That he thought her a sneak and a thief pained her.

"Please let him know the truth," she prayed silently. "I love him so."

Then she was blazing away at Murdo and his renegade crew, who were closing in for the kill.

Leah and her two companions were backed against the steep bank of the Danger. Their ammunition was low. The end was only a matter of minutes now, Leah knew. The outlaws, in a wide semicircle and covered by the

brush and rocks along the river bank, were taking no chances.

Leah sent her last bullet at the white blotch of an outlaw face. It drew a howl of pain, and a hot fusillade of lead.

"They're ready to charge," howled Dunkirk. He pointed at the cable-box, pulled up to the bank a short distance away. "That's our only out. I'll cover these babies while you two make a break for it. That cable slants to the far bank. All you do is jump in and shove off. Get going, before they swarm us!"

"But me, I cannot make the ron," complained Luis. "I am cripple in the leg. You take the girl. Weeth these six shell, I make her hot for the skonk!"

"No use arguin' with you." Dunkirk produced a gold coin. "My luck piece. Heads, I stay."

He flipped the coin. As it came to rest in the cold moonlight at his feet, Leah sucked in a sharp breath.

"Good old luck piece," said Dunkirk. "Take her and run, pardner!"

A flip of a coin, Leah thought. A quirk of fate, and a brave man must die. Well, he wouldn't die alone. Not the man she loved!

But Leah had no choice in the matter. The next thing she knew, the renegades were closing in with a mad rush and Dunkirk, six-guns roaring a greeting, was stepping from behind the nest of rocks, stepping out to meet death. Luis held her in his arms and was running toward the cable-box.

Leah struggled. She swore and cried and kicked. But Luis was too strong for her. He reached the cable-box and tossed her inside.

Dunkirk was between the cable-box and the outlaws, his six-guns still booming. Then Leah saw him fall. A sob escaped her lips, and she tried to climb out of the cable-box. Luis shoved her back. Grinning like some dark imp from hell, he emptied his Colts at the outlaws.

That screaming blast drove the pack back to cover. Then Luis whipped out a knife and slashed the mooring rope. As they went rocking into space, Leah caught a last glimpse of Chance Dunkirk struggling to get to his feet.

Below them, a shimmering ribbon of silver, lay the Danger. Behind them, facing certain death bravely so that a girl he despised might go free, was the man Leah loved. As the renegade guns again took up their savage dirge, Leah knew with a dreadful certainty that life no longer was worth the living. Not for her.

SHE tried to grasp the cable.

"If there's a heart in you, Luis, take me back!" she begged.

Gently he pulled her to him. "You don' understand," he said softly. "Death—it is nothing. I take you to be safe, then I am go back. The flip of the coin but decide who is die first. My *capitan* and me, we are just ride this night to the new adventure. That is all. We— *Madre de Dios!* I am just remember something!"

"What is it?" cried Leah. "Why are you looking so—"

"I am just remember the other time he have flip with me," he said excitedly. "This luck piece, she have head on both side! Hey! Where you go?"

Too late he tried to grab her. In a clean dive Leah went over the side. Dark water rushed up to meet her, slammed against her, and blackness closed in. Then her head popped clear of the surface.

She was out of breath and numb from the icy water when she reached the river bank. But there was no time to rest. Those guns were still yammering. He was still alive!

It took what seemed an eternity to reach the dam and to scramble up the bank. With no thought save to die beside the man she loved, she began running. She was opposite the supply shed when an idea came to her. Instantly she darted inside. Leah spent a full minute fumbling around in the

darkness, and then she resumed her mad dash up the river bank. In her hands were some dry matches and what resembled a loop of cotton rope.

Just ahead she saw the outlaws popping up from behind their rocks. From the depression which concealed Chance Dunkirk came ominous silence.

"He's outa gun fodder!" she heard Murdo yell. "Let's take him!"

Leah kneeled down and a match glowed in her hand. When she came to her feet, a ropelike loop was hissing, making a red glow as she held it in front of her. A scant twenty yards up the river bank, their Colts roaring a death requiem, the outlaws were closing in on their defenseless prey.

"Run, you rats!" yelled Leah, and with the hissing coil clutched in her hand went leaping straight into the muzzles of those outlaw guns. "Run, or this dynamite'll blow us all to Glory!"

From behind her came Dunkirk's frantic yell.

"Leah! Throw that stuff away! Leah, throw it!"

Leah paid no attention to his cry. Like some grim angel of death, she held her relentless course. She was within ten feet of the renegades before their nerves cracked and they stampeded.

Despite the grimness of the situation, Leah smiled. She flung the hissing coil at the heels of Harg Murdo.

She knew, though, that they'd soon get over their fright, that they'd soon be back. But she didn't care much. She was running to meet a tall, limping figure. She was running into the arms of Chance Dunkirk.

It didn't seem real to her when she heard wild cowboy yells, the thunder of pounding hoofs, and saw old Tom Gates and a dozen others dash past her. Nor did it seem incredible when, high above the sudden din, she heard Luis shout:

"Hey, that one is for me! Save me that skonk of a Murdo!"

Nothing seemed impossible to her now, with the arms of Chance Dunkirk around her. It didn't even seem far-fetched to think that maybe he loved her. If he didn't, why did he keep squeezing her so tight and keep saying such things in her ear?

"I love you, darling," he breathed softly. "I love you."

"Oh, Chance, say it again!" she begged.

"You're wounded," he growled. "One of those dirty—"

"Oh, you dim-witted idiot!" she snapped. Then blackness enfolded her.

When she came to she was lying on the ground and Chance Dunkirk was kneeling beside her. Doc Crane was squatted over her, too, and behind him she made out Luis and old Tom Gates and some others.

"She'll be all right," said Doc Crane. "Just a scalp wound and a few nicks here and there."

"Come on, fellers," a harsh voice snarled. "Chance seems sorta outa his head, but he'll come out of it. Mebbe he don't know about his buildin's bein' fired and half the cows in the valley bein' stole! C'mon, let's get the job over. We'll burn out this rustler nest first, then we'll blow that dam!"

An angry murmur rose. Leah, with Dunkirk helping her, got to her feet. She saw Keno Drew scowling at her, and with him old Tom Gates and a dozen other valley ranchers and some of the Flag riders. They were all in an ugly humor.

They started in a body toward their horses.

"Wait!" Dunkirk ordered. "I know all about this. It was Bar B men that burned my place, right enough, and did the rustling, too. But Leah had nothing to do with it. Harg Murdo was behind it all. You rounded up most of his crew. Where is Murdo? I'll choke the truth out of him!"

"That one, he is mos' prob'ly in this place which is moch hotter than

Texas," murmured Luis. "But me, I have know all the time he is the crook. I am in Panama when my *capitan* he write he have the job for me. I have go to Orejana and have get in with this Chombo Gantt. I have learn how the skonk Murdo steal the cow and ron them across the river until the Bar B she is mos' bust, and the Senor Barrett have sell the share to this Murdo. Then he have kill Senor Barrett and have think to marry the girl, so he get the whole *rancho*.

"But my *capitan* upset the apples cart when the girl she fall in love for him. So this Murdo know he have lose, and this night he plan the last big haul. Now, he don' never steal no more, and if you don' believe Luis maybeso you gonna choke this Gotch Ansell till he make what you call the confess."

He gazed a moment at Ansell, who was trussed up on the ground like a calf for branding, and then he strode to a handsome black horse that had belonged to Harg Murdo and swung into the silver-mounted saddle.

"*Adios,* my *capitan,*" Luis murmured, gazing down at Dunkirk and Leah. "The bullet she have never bring you down, but the pretty girl she have finish you. And jus' when I am fix to start the big revolution!"

LUIS reined the prancing black around, and Leah's eyes were strangely blurred. "I mus' go where there trouble is. The quiet life she is not for Luis de Madero. *Adios,* Miss Barrett. *Adios,* Senor Dunkirk."

Then he was gone, waving a hand in a last careless good-by as he faded against the backdrop of the horizon.

"Damn my soul," exploded old Tom Gates, "I never did like Harg Murdo, anyhow!" Then: "What about the dam, Chance?"

"Well," said Dunkirk, laughing, "it looks like we're going to have a new race track and rodeo grounds—at my expense. 'Cause Leah's sure going to finish that dam, and I'm hoping she'll ask me to help her."

"Just try to get out of helping me!" she retorted happily.

She was dead tired and trembling from bullet shock, but at the feel of his strong arms about her she knew a deep happiness. Everything was all right now. With Chance siding her she would finish that dam in short order, would leave a lasting monument to the memory of her pioneer father, Lee Barrett. And with Chance loving her—

"Leah," he was saying worriedly, "Leah, are you all right? Say something, darling!"

"She's jest foolin' yuh, Chance," said old Tom Gates. "When yuh stay hitched long as I have, yuh get to know 'em. That's the way they act when they want us men to honey 'em up."

"She wasn't fooling when she ran at those outlaws with that dynamite spitting in her hand!" said Dunkirk hotly. "She nearly scared me to death!"

Leah's eyes fluttered open. "But I was fooling," she told him. "In that dark supply shed I couldn't find any dynamite. I bluffed those killers. All I had was a fuse." She pulled his face down to her. "I'm not fooling now, though," she whispered, and pressed her lips against his.

NEXT ISSUE

MAVERICK GIRL

A Complete Novelet of Range Battle

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

A Strange Waddy's Fiery Kiss Brings Trouble to the Quick-Tempered Darling of the Circle W

Half-Pint Jane

By EUGENE A. CLANCY

Author of "Wrong Side of the Rio," "Hearts and Hemp," etc.

NEAL KILDARE, wandering waddy from the Burnt Hills country, had a hunch that he was close to his desination, and he was letting his pinto amble along at a walk through the little canyon into which the trail across the open range suddenly descended.

He was in no hurry, and he leisurely rolled a smoke. He had ridden three hundred miles into this Thunder Mountain country, new to him, but he was at peace with the world.

And then, from directly ahead, the bellow of a six-gun shattered this comfortable state of mind. The gun roared again and again, but the shots were deliberate, as if being carefully placed.

HIS lips set in a thin line, the big, rather grim-faced young waddy, swung his mount into the concealing brush beside the trail and dropped from the saddle, tossing away his cigarette. He did not want to risk the pinto until he knew what the ruckus was all about.

Snatching out his gun, he ran forward and darted between two great boulders that almost closed the trail. In a moment he saw that beyond these two boulders the canyon suddenly opened out into a great basin —and then Kildare stopped short, his gray eyes filled with amusement, He holstered his Colt, and stood staring.

For the ruckus consisted solely and entirely of a lone girl, a slim little half-pint in overalls stuffed into dusty riding boots and a man's blue work shirt. She had her back to the waddy and was entirely absorbed out there in her occupation of tossing a tin can into the air and firing at it with a heavy six-gun.

She probably was eighteen or nineteen, but she looked more like a kid of fourteen. She was bare-headed, her smooth, short brown hair flapping about her small head as she recovered the can and tossed it up again. The gun was obviously too big for her small, tanned hand—and suddenly Neal chuckled to himself, for it was as if he was watching a child playing with a cannon.

Then he caught a glimpse of her face as she half turned toward him in chasing the tin can, and the waddy felt his heart pound queerly, for he realized that she was about the prettiest girl he'd ever seen, and somehow her shabby clothes seemed to make her more distracting. He saw a mustang pony standing off to one side of the basin.

"Some nester's kid, I reckon," he thought. "But, gosh, she sure is pretty!"

She had not observed him as yet, and he hesitated to make his presence known—he did not want to destroy the picture. She was jamming fresh shells into the gun, and again she went to work on the tin can, until the gun was empty.

Neal watched her inspect the can after each shot, and now he felt rather than saw her chagrin. Not a single shot had hit the can! She was so obviously eager and earnest that a glow of sympathy came to the big waddy. He was about to step out from between the boulders, but he stopped short—and blinked.

The distracting half-pint was cussing a blue streak! She stamped her foot, kicked the tin can across the basin, and flung the six-gun to the ground with the earnest rage of a little savage! The spectacle brought the waddy back to earth.

"Don't take it so hard, sister," he remarked, stepping out into the basin. "Your timin' is right, but that gun's too heavy for you. You'd do fine with one of them toy guns—a thirty-two pistol."

Neal spoke soothingly, but the girl fairly jumped into the air, then whirled around. The waddy was now within two feet of her, and he found himself looking down into wide, childlike brown eyes—only now they were filled with scorching anger and resentment. She shook back her shining, silky hair, her hands clenching into tight little fists.

"Is that so!" she flared. "A *toy* gun! Suppose you mind your own business, Mister? Who are you—and what do you mean by sneaking in here and spying on me?"

The waddy flushed. Standing there glaring up at him in that ferocious

way, she was more distractingly pretty than he had thought. She was doing queer things to his heart. With difficulty he checked the eager impulse to pick her up in his arms and kiss her. But he saw too late that his quite innocent remark about a toy gun had been a most serious mistake. He tried to undo the damage.

"I'm sorry, Miss," he said contritely. "I wasn't meanin' any offense. I—I just meant that maybe a smaller gun would—"

"What you meant was quite clear, Mister!" she cut him off. "And I warn you that insolent strangers are not wanted in these parts—"

"Say—listen here!" the waddy protested, doing a little glaring himself now. "You hold your hosses, Half-pint! Neal Kildare ain't ever insolent to girls! And I didn't sneak in here! I heard somebody throwin' lead, and dismounted to see what the ruckus was. My gosh—I'll be right pleased to buy you a gun built to your size and show you how to hit that can every time! But I ain't in the habit of bein' looked at and talked at like I was somebody's pet skunk—"

THE brown-eyed half-pint stepped back a pace and glanced quickly around, for the aggravated waddy's tone and manner *were* forbidding. He stopped short and felt like kicking himself. He was scaring her—scaring this kid, the loveliest girl he'd ever put eyes on! Instinctively he took a step toward her.

"You don't have to be scared of *me*, Miss!" he blurted. "I'm on my way to the Nard Burnett spread. Booked for a job there. I reckon you can tell me how far it is—"

He did not finish, for the girl whirled around and scampered to the spot where she had flung down the six-gun. She grabbed it up and covered him with it.

"You get out of here pronto, Mister!" The angry command was robbed of much of its force by the fact that the muzzle of the heavy gun wobbled considerably. The waddy was not quick enough in hiding a slight grin. The girl saw it. She bit her lip; the brown eyes snapped dangerously. "You heard me!" she cried. "I happen to know the Burnetts mighty well—and they're not hiring any Border roughnecks! Get going!"

Before the astonished and aggravated waddy could figure out what to do about the matter, there came the sound of hoofbeats, and a rider mounted on a mettlesome roan trotted into the basin from an opening in the far side.

The newcomer was a heavy-set man, perhaps a year or so older than Kildare. He was wearing flashy doeskin riding breeches, a fine leather hunting jacket, and a big, snow-white Stetson. He was handsome—but Neal Kildare did not like the gleam of arrogance in his tricky dark eyes, nor his wisp of a mustache.

The rider pulled up beside the girl and as he glanced from her to Neal and back again his hand went to one of his silver-mounted Colts. Something in the big waddy's eyes, however, made him take his hand away from the gun butt, though the gleam in his eyes became nasty.

"What's this, Jane?" he demanded, frowning. "This jasper botherin' you—you make a move toward them guns, hombre, an' I'll drop you!"

But Neal Kildare was merely rolling and lighting a cigarette. The girl stuffed the six-gun into her holster. The waddy saw a certain warm light show in the brown eyes as they rested on the newcomer. Suddenly a highly personal resentment boiled up in Neal Kildare. So *that* was the way it was! He might have known—the nester girl had

fallen for those dude pants and that trick mustache!

"Oh, Chet—I was afraid you weren't coming!" the girl burst out. "I was doing a little target practice with—with a new gun while waiting for you—and this hulking ranny came sneaking up on me! He says his name is Neal Kildare and he's booked for a job with your dad's outfit!"

CHET BURNETT dismounted and stood looking at Neal with that nasty gleam in his eyes. The waddy's manner, as he stood there quietly smoking, was deceiving. Young Burnett had no means of knowing that Neal Kildare was most dangerous when apparently the most harmless of men.

"Slick little story!" said Burnett. "We ain't takin' on saddle tramps, hombre! I reckon yore hoss is back of them boulders. Mount an' ride —fast!"

The waddy dropped his cigarette, carefully scrunched it out with the toe of his boot.

"Yore foreman, Burnett," he said quietly, "maybe ain't got back yet, or has forgotten it, but he booked me up when he was over in the Burnt Hills country after new stock. But it don't matter now, 'cause I'm goin' to tell yuh somethin'. I ain't in the habit of bein' called a liar an' a saddle tramp by yaller mutts—"

The girl jumped back with a sharp cry as Burnett whipped out a gun. It roared and flamed almost as the muzzle left the holster—flamed, as it seemed, directly into Neal Kildare's face!

The waddy, however, ducked to one side. He made no attempt to draw his own gun, but in the tick of a second he leaped in, his arm shot out, and his rocklike fist smashed into Chet Burnett's jaw.

The gun dropped from Burnett's hand. He reeled, and went sprawling, to land heavily on his back, several yards away. As he lay there gasping, blood dripping from his smashed lip, the girl ran to him, flung herself down beside him, and gathered him in her arms. She turned blazing eyes on the grim-faced waddy.

"Mount and ride, you—you hulking beast, you—you coward!" The hot, scornful words fairly shot from her quivering lips.

Neal Kildare flushed, and then went white. His heart sickened. A sweet kid like her — cuddling a treacherous skunk in her arms!

"I reckon yuh don't know what you're talkin' about, Miss," he said thickly, as again her sheer loveliness gripped him, caused a lump to rise in his throat. "You saw him draw on me without warnin'. But if that's the way yuh feel about it, you're sure welcome to him! I won't be botherin' yuh no more. I don't aim to work for an outfit that is infested by a pet skunk! I'm ridin' pronto—back the way I came!"

The waddy rode back up the canyon with strange emotions surging through him; at least, some of them were strange. His cold contempt for Chet Burnett, who had made no attempt to get up or even speak, was normal. But he could not get that lovely, spunky girl out of his head —or out of his heart. He hadn't even dreamed of meeting up with a girl like that!

Jane—he liked the sound. He'd met up with the one girl — and she was in love with a white-livered coyote! A kid as sweet and clean as the range itself—

Neal Kildare mentally shook himself and rolled a cigarette as the pinto loped up out of the canyon and onto the winding trail across the mesa. He had intended to head back for the Burnt Hills. You could fight for a girl when you knew you had a chance; but the scorn in her

eyes had been too genuine—and the way she had run to the skunk and cuddled him!

Yeah! Girls were funny that way—and them girl-crazy skunks knew how to hogtie the best of them! The kid was poor an' half starved, of course, like most nester girls, and had to herd by herself. Easy meat for the son of a wealthy ranch owner—and the Burnetts were said to be kingpins out here.

SUDDENLY the waddy's eyes became grim again and his jaw set. He'd lost the girl even before he'd found her—but if this Chet Burnett hound should get the notion that he, Neal Kildare, was running away—

His plans undergoing a swift change, the waddy swung the pinto into a fork of the trail. He realized now that he had been riding for hours since leaving the canyon. The sun had set and darkness was creeping over the mesa. He urged the pinto into a mild gallop, heading for a big, rambling ranchhouse he had noted when passing this way in the morning. Perhaps this outfit could use another hand—and he could stick around and have a look-see at these uppity Burnetts.

Hank Wovern, the boss of the Circle W, was sitting on the veranda steps with four or five of his men, waiting for the Chinese cook to call them to grub as Kildare rode up. The waddy was greeted with the usual keen, silent, inspection, but he sensed that the verdict was favorable. Neal mentioned that he had been promised a job with the Burnetts—but he omitted to say why he had turned back.

"Yuh look right, Kildare," said the small, wiry, grizzled owner. "But if yuh was booked for the Burnett spread, how come yuh changed yore mind?"

The young waddy flushed. He was not accustomed to concealing things, and these men were judging him. Suddenly he told them what had happened in the canyon. To his utter bewilderment, his story was greeted with gales of laughter! In other circumstances, anger might have flamed in Neal Kildare; but somehow he felt no resentment. These men were his kind. Their laughter was friendly; it was just that there was something here that he did not understand.

"What's the big idea, you laughin' hyenas?" he asked, grinning. "I wouldn't call that Chet Burnett skunk any laughin' matter!"

"He ain't—and yuh shore called the turn on him!" said Hank Wovern, as the Chinaman gave the call to supper and the group got to their feet. "You're hired, Kildare! Come on in and grub yourself!"

When they were seated at the table in the big living room, Kildare found himself warming to these men—but his question still remained unanswered. For a time there was only the business of hungry cowpokes eating, Neal doing his share and wondering. Finally Hank Wovern shoved back his chair and rolled a cigarette. He exchanged a covert grin with his men.

"I'll have a talk with yuh in the mornin', Kildare," he said. "Just now— Tell us again about this nester girl! That shore is funny! Yuh say she called yuh a Border roughneck an' pulled a six-gun on yuh? And she run and *cuddled* that pet skunk when yuh knocked him loco? And yuh say she cussed a blue streak when she couldn't hit that tin can?"

"Yeah," replied the waddy, grinning, though he was beginning to be a little nettled—he wasn't going to sit there and make fun of a helpless little nester girl—

And then, as he happened to glance around the room, the grin left Neal Kildare's face. For, stand-

ing in the kitchen doorway, was the half-pint herself—little Jane!

And the wide brown eyes were blazing at him! Wovern and the others turned quickly to the doorway as they saw the waddy's change of expression. A most uncomfortable silence fell in the room.

"You!" the quivering half-pint shot at him, her cheeks flushed hotly under her deep tan. "So you sneaked in here, just like you sneaked into the canyon—to tattle-tale and make fun of me! I might have known you'd come right here—after nearly killing poor Chet with your bare hands! You—you— Oh—"

Choking, she whirled and ran back through the kitchen. The screen door slammed.

THE big waddy felt suddenly hot all over. He got up to follow her, but the cowpoke beside him yanked him down. They were all grinning at him.

"That's somethin' yuh'll have to git use to if yuh're goin' to stick with this outfit, Kildare!" said Hank Wovern. "Yuh see, we've just been havin' a little fun with yuh. It was too good to miss! That there young lady don't happen to be a nester girl. So help me, she's my daughter! Yeah! The roof is blowed off most every day, but don't yuh let it bother yuh none—it's just Jane!"

The waddy did not smile. He was thinking wretchedly. A wild happiness had gripped him when he saw her framed there in the doorway—and then his heart had chilled at the scorn in her eyes, the hot words she flung at him. Nearly killed Burnett with his bare hands!

However, that outrageous statement didn't matter now, nor did anything else matter. No use trying to explain to her that he had come here by pure chance. She never would believe that now! She hated him.

Chance sure had played him a dirty trick! Of all places on the wide range, he had to come directly to her own house—and have her catch him grinning like an ape and talking about her! Well, there was only one thing to do now. He got up unsmilingly and gave a hitch to his gun-belt.

"I sure thank you, Mr. Wovern," he said, "but I reckon I can't take that job now. This is Miss Jane's home, and it wouldn't be fair to her—"

"Fair to her!" Hank burst out. "I'm needin' another hand here mighty bad, Kildare, and if yuh think I'm goin' to let that gal of mine interfere—"

"I'm ridin', Mr. Wovern—right now!" said Neal, finality in his voice. "I'll be gettin' my hoss."

The other men were trooping out through the kitchen, bound for the bunkhouse. Neal started to follow them as far as the corral, but Wovern, who was no bigger than his half-pint daughter, grabbed him by the arm and stared up at him. There was no laughter in Hank Wovern's faded blue eyes now; they were filled with an almost pathetic, eager pleading. Neal Kildare's pulse quickened.

"Come out on the veranda a minute, Kildare," said Wovern.

The waddy complied, and sat down on the top step beside the old man.

"I'll make it short," said Hank Wovern. "It ain't just that I need another hand here—I need *you,* Kildare! Yuh see, I happen to know who yuh are—the fightin' waddy who cleaned up that crooked Harmon crowd in the Burnt Hills last year!"

Neal Kildare started. "But I don't see—"

"I'm tellin' yuh," said Wovern. "Nard Burnett is as big a scoundrel as his son! This is the only other ranch 'round here, 'cept the Burnett

spread, and Nard Burnett wants to buy me out so's he won't be hampered by neighbors who see too much.

"I won't sell, but them Burnetts are clever. They've hit on another way to git control of the Circle W an' hogtie me! Nard aims to have his young whelp marry Jane, and so help me the smooth scheme is workin'! The whelp knows how to git around wimmen—and my loco daughter has fallen hard for them dude pants and that trick mustache!"

Hank paused to cuss luridly—but Neal saw him brush his thin old hand across his eyes.

"I've told her she's just bein' made a monkey of by a pair of slickers, but they've got her buffaloed complete! Nothin' is too good for Jane over at the Bar B—they treat her like she was the Queen of Sheba!

"I've forbidden that Chet skunk the house, but she meets him elsewheres. They're too slick to say a word against me to her. They just sympathize with her—and she says I'm just stubborn and prejudiced! They're engaged, and so help me I'm afraid she'll marry the young whelp overnight if somethin' ain't done about it pronto!"

Neal Kildare's hands clenched in the darkness. He felt himself weakening.

"What makes you think *I* can do anythin' about it?" he asked.

"I'll tell yuh somethin' I found out only yesterday mornin'," said Hank Wovern, putting a hand on the waddy's arm. "That Harmon crowd that yuh broke up was really workin' for Nard Burnett!

"Yeah—Nard is kind of a master range crook! Why, shucks, Kildare—yuh must have seen Nard Burnett over in the Burnt Hills country! Only, over there he called hisself Norton Baxter, and posed as a mine promoter—big, sharp-faced cuss with a long, thin nose and gimlet eyes—"

In the darkness the waddy's grim eyes flashed, his body tensed. He did remember the man who had called himself Norton Baxter.

"So *that's* who the cuss is!" he said. "Yeah—I've seen him! And I'd sure like to meet up with Mister Baxter-Burnett again! He swindled Burnt Hills folks out of thousands of dollars—and I'm admittin' the dirty cuss slipped through my fingers while I was busy chasin' Harmon. I've changed my mind, Mr. Wovern—I'm stickin' around for a spell!"

"Reckoned yuh would, Kildare," said Wovern as both men stood up and shook hands. "I ain't feelin' so good and I'm turnin' in."

LEFT alone on the veranda, Neal rolled a smoke and stood there for several minutes, his eyes narrowed. The moon had risen, flooding the ghostly mesa and the veranda with silvery light. Tossing away the butt of his cigarette, he was about to go down the steps and around to the bunkhouse, when one of the big, roomy armchairs on the wide veranda creaked.

He stepped to it, and then stood looking down at it with a sudden conflict of emotions. His eyes were grim, but it was all he could do to suppress a chuckle.

For, huddled down in the chair was the slight figure of the brown-eyed half-pint, Miss Jane Wovern! She met his eyes before she could carry out her panicky intention of pretending to be asleep.

"Reckon yuh been hearin' things yuh didn't know about?" said the waddy, grinning.

Jane sprang to her feet and glared up at him, her fists clenched. Which was slightly ridiculous, as the top of her smooth head scarcely came up to his big shoulders.

"Yes—you hulking sneak!" she flared at him. "And I'm mighty glad

I did! Of all the mean lies I ever heard! But I see now! You hate the Burnetts and you plan to use poor Dad as a tool! Chet was right—that was just a bluff about taking a job with the Burnetts. You intended to come here all the time, and work on Dad. I don't believe what Dad said about Nard Burnett being Norton Baxter. And now I see why you followed me to the canyon—you thought you could take *me* in, too! Oh, I—I could *kill* you—"

But this tirade ended in a gasp. Perhaps it was the moonlight. Whatever it was, Neal Kildare gave rein to that impulse of the morning. He picked her up in his arms, pressed his lips to her soft hair, her wild, startled eyes, then crushed the tempting red mouth in an eager kiss.

For just a split second of time he felt her lips, warm and sweet, move in response, felt her heart beating against his. Then she was struggling frantically, an odd little cry in her throat, and he set her down.

For a long moment Jane Wovern stood panting, a strange, half-dazed light in her eyes. Neal gazed at her, his heart thumping, shaken by the sweetness of her.

"I—I could kill you for that!" she breathed; but now her voice was very small—it was like a trembling whisper.

"Maybe!" said Neal thickly. "But now you know what it is to be kissed by a man who really loves you! Think it over, Half-pint!"

Her lips moved, but before she could speak he was striding down the steps.

LIKE a girl in a trance, Jane went into the house, went blindly upstairs, shut herself in her room. She stood for a moment, vainly trying to still the beating of her heart, aware that her blood was racing in her veins.

She moved to her glass, and stood looking at herself in the same dazed, startled way she had looked at the big waddy. She touched her lips with her hand. She still could feel his kiss crushing her. That kiss had thrilled her, filled her with a wild, sweet emotion that never before had she experienced! She flushed scarlet as she gazed into her own eyes, but there was no use denying it!

Then suddenly she flung herself face down on the bed, beating the pillow with her clenched fists, hot tears on her cheeks as a storm of conflicting emotions shook her.

Chet Burnett had never kissed her like that! This thought persisted through the storm; this, and another fact that now loomed large—always, when a certain light showed in Chet Burnett's eyes, she had a panicky urge to run like a scared rabbit! Just now, however, down there on the veranda, she had *not* felt like running—

Hank Wovern's daughter buried her hot face in the pillow, her brain in a turmoil. She was angry at herself—at the way her heart had betrayed her, though she would not admit it. Finally her wrath turned on Neal Kildare. She wanted to hurt him, for she felt that only by doing so could she make him realize that he meant nothing to her now.

She sprang up from the bed, swift decision in her lovely eyes. It was all slimy lies about the Burnetts, of course, but this scheming man who had dared to kiss her had put the Indian sign on Dad. She'd have to do something to bring Dad to his senses, something drastic. She'd have show-down—tonight!

Thoughts raced through her mind—and she was far more excited than she realized. She'd ride over to the Bar B right now. She'd tell Chet and his father what she had heard, and ask them to ride over here in the morning and have a frank talk with Dad. If they were innocent, as

she felt sure they were, of course, they'd come fast enough— They would prove that Kildare had been lying, and he would be given the choice of hightailing over the horizon or being handed over to the Silver Gulch sheriff! And that would be the end of him and his grim eyes and his conquering hero airs!

She did not know that at that very moment the Burnetts' men were riding out to raid her father's herd.

She opened the door and tiptoed out into the long upper hall. She had to pass her father's room. The door was open. In the silver moonlight she saw him, already asleep. But he had dropped on the bed without undressing, merely taking off his boots. Hank was not well, and he had been feeling mighty bad for the last three days.

Jane's heart did a flip-flap as she stole in and stood looking down at him. Her conscience tied itself into knots! What if she were doing the wrong thing in telling the Burnetts what she had overheard!

The range girl loved this grizzled old veteran of a dad who let her browbeat him all over the place. Gently she moved the pillow to make his head more comfortable, then swiftly she bent down and kissed him. For a moment she stood irresolute, fighting her own heart! Old Dad made things awful difficult, but suppose this nasty story about the Burnetts was true! Suppose—

But it simply couldn't be true! Chet loved her, and so did his father. Both showed it, and they were so—so understanding! That they could be making a fool of her, Jane Wovern, was just too ridiculous.

The very thought made her thoroughbred blood boil. It was all the fault of that Kildare scourge! Kissing her like that— She'd show him! She'd fix his hash tonight, good and proper!

She stole from the room and flitted downstairs. It flashed on her as she stole out to the veranda and down the steps that she must get away from the ranch without being spotted. She was not in the habit of riding alone at night.

If the hulking Kildare brute saw her getting her pony he would guess what she had in mind and would try to stop her, and so would those thickheaded jellyfish in the bunkhouse; for by now the swaggering conquering hero would have them eating out of his hand!

Creeping around the house with her light saddle over a shoulder, luck was with the girl, or seemed to be. Rain clouds were scudding across the sultry night sky and the bothersome moon disappeared as she crouched for a second, then darted for the rear of the corral fence.

Through the open door of the bunkhouse she saw the "jellyfish" sprawled about, smoking and talking, but she could not discern the big form of the grim-eyed scourge. No doubt he was in there, spreading his lies—but it would be like him to be lurking out here somewhere, snooping and spying.

She climbed nimbly over the fence and snaffled her pony without any trouble and without disturbing the other mounts. Two loose bars in the rear of the fence made a back gate to the corral. She moved them, led the pony out, and then replaced the bars, all with scarcely a sound.

PATTING the horse, she led it at a cautious walk until they were well away from the home buildings and hidden behind a sharp rise in the mesa. Then she vaulted lightly into the saddle and dug heels.

She was heading for the Bar B by a winding back trail that twisted through deep ravines and cut be-

tween small, densely wooded foothills. It was a longer way, but she feared to risk the main trail through the canyon.

Any minute somebody might discover that she and the pony were missing—and that grim-eyed hyena would give chase at once!

But this back trail was seldom used; it was a bad trail even for those who knew it, and at night the going was mighty treacherous. It was most unlikely that they would suspect her of being so foolhardy as to risk her neck on it.

There was no need of mad haste, but when Jane Wovern decided to do something, she became a seething bundle of impatience until that something was accomplished. She proceeded now to risk her neck in good earnest, sending the pony over the dark, twisting, treacherous trail at reckless speed, her childish lips set, her brown eyes glowing with purpose.

SHE had been riding at this furious pace for half an hour when some instinct caused her to pull up in the depths of a narrow, wooded ravine and sit listening—and then she caught her breath, her heart thumping.

Her warning instinct had been right—another horse was pounding along the trail behind her, close behind! The grim-eyed devil *had* been lurking and snooping—he had seen her! And with slimy cunning, knowing that his splendid pinto could easily run down her pony, he had let her mount and ride, planning to catch her in just some such lonely spot as this!

Suddenly the hardy little range girl became utterly feminine. A crazy panic gripped her. He would yank her off her horse, pick her up in his arms and kiss her again—*like that!* Her hand flew to her holster—empty! She'd forgotten to pick up her gun from the dresser when she left her room. She was at his mercy!

The beast had done strange things to her. That kiss had left her weak and yielding—there was no use denying it now—and if he did it again, she—she would be eating out of his hand!

Whether or not she got to the Bar B tonight didn't matter now. All that mattered now was that—that she could not trust herself with Neal Kildare! The very thought started her heart beating faster. She must get away from him, even if she spent the night on the trail or hiding in the woods—

There was no use going on. In her strange, unwonted panic, she yanked inexpertly on the reins, her intent being to plunge the pony in amongst the concealing scrub pine and cottonwoods beside the trail.

The startled pony went into a panic of its own. It reared straight up on its hind legs. Jane clutched wildly at the reins, but the little horse backed up, went into a sort of devil dance—and then bolted.

Jane, clawing now at the empty air, toppled from its back as it took the bit in its teeth and raced on, riderless, and was instantly swallowed up in the darkness.

The small girl landed on her back, hard. For a moment she lay there, the breath knocked out of her, her senses reeling. But then she caught the thud of hoofs, seemingly directly on top of her!

She rolled over, and in the darkness she glimpsed the rider pulling up short. She heard his sharp exclamation. He must have heard the commotion with the snorting pony. Anyway, he pulled up within a foot of her head!

But he'd caught her. She was too late! Nevertheless, on hands and knees, she tried to slither into the brush. But now the rider was out of the saddle. He picked her up and

stood her on her feet, holding her in his arms.

Then Jane gasped, for the man who was holding her and looking at her with an astonishment as great as her own was not Neal Kildare, but Chet's tall, thin, catlike father, Nard Burnett! Though it never occurred to Jane that he was catlike, and had dark, tricky eyes that went well with his soft, smooth manner.

"Jane!" he exclaimed. "What on earth—"

"Oh, Mr. Burnett!" she gasped, clinging to him. "I—I thought you were someone else! I thought he was following me! I was riding for the Bar B. My pony threw me— No, I'm not hurt! But my pony's gone—"

"Silver Heels will carry us both—we'll round up yore pony in the morning," said Burnett. He stroked her hair and soothed her with sufficiently genuine fatherly solicitude. "But you're frightened, Jane! Who was it yuh thought was following yuh—"

"That hulking ranny, Neal Kildare!" Jane blurted, the brown eyes beginning to flame again as her panic subsided.

"Neal Kildare!" the name came from Nard Burnett's thin lips softly. His tricky eyes narrowed. "Chet told me that he was just in time to save yuh from some roughneck this mornin', in the canyon. Yes—that was the skunk's name, Neal Kildare. But Chet said the cuss hightailed out of these parts—"

"But he didn't!" said Jane quickly. "Oh, Mr. Burnett—that's what I was riding to tell you and Chet about!" Rapidly she told of finding the waddy at the Circle W—and what she had overheard. "It's all slimy lies, of course," she said, looking up at him with a certain pathetic eagerness in her childlike eyes, "but somehow I feel that things have reached a crisis, Mr. Burnett! I can't wait another day to have things set right. I want to see you and Chet and Dad friends! Surely, Mr. Burnett, you can find some way of convincing Dad that he's all wrong about you!"

She was looking up at him earnestly. One of his arms was still over her shoulder, but now suddenly Jane shrank away from him, a startled light in her eyes. Nard Burnett's thin lips were drawn back in a snarl, his whole face contorted, a wicked gleam in his narrow eyes. His rage had tricked him into dropping his mask.

"Why, why—Mr. Burnett!" Jane gasped. "You—you look—"

The words died on her lips. Burnett suppressed an oath and got control of himself. The fat was in the fire and it didn't matter much now, but this girl might still prove to be an ace in the hole.

"I know this Kildare!" he said, not quite able to keep his rage out of his voice. "A smooth scoundrel—and a killer! And yuh mean to say he's right there at the Circle W—that yore dad signed him up?"

"Yes!" said Jane.

BUT she was looking at Nard Burnett searchingly now, queer little doubts disturbing her. She remembered that once before she had seen Nard Burnett like that—when she had burst into the Bar B living room unexpectedly, after telling Chet that she couldn't make up her mind yet about marrying him, but she had forgotten it until now. Still, faith in people is not shattered in one moment.

"A killer!" repeated Burnett. "And yore dad hired him!"

"But don't you see?" she said desperately. "I want you to come to the Circle W tomorrow and face this man before Dad—let Dad see for himself that it is all nasty lies—"

"I'll do that, Jane!" said Burnett,

with a thin smile. "But you've had enough trouble for tonight. Let's mount! I'll put yuh up at the Bar B for tonight, and—"

"I—I think I'd better go home," said Jane, her heart pounding queerly. "You don't have to come to the house. You can drop me close by and I'll walk. It would be as well if that hulking—if Neal Kildare didn't know I had left the house tonight—"

"You're coming to the Bar B," said Burnett with a certain sharp finality. "I wouldn't have you in the same place with that scoundrel overnight," he added quickly. "Besides, I reckon you an' me an' Chet better talk this whole thing over. Yore dad will understand tomorrow. Come on, Madcap!"

He climbed into the saddle and held out his hand to help her up behind him. But somehow the pet name he had invented for her did not bring the usual gay smile to Jane's face. She stood hesitating.

"I'd—I'd rather go home," she said weakly.

"Nonsense!" said Burnett, suppressing another oath. "Chet would be furious! Give me yore hand!"

Her brain in a turmoil, Jane surrendered. Burnett drew her up behind him, and sent the big roan loping on through the ravine. Jane clung to the man in front of her with small arms clasped around his waist. Perhaps it was all right, but she was no longer sure—and never yet had she spent a night out of her own little room in the Circle W ranchhouse!

THE roan was climbing out of the ravine, and Jane realized that in her panic she had forgotten that when her pony threw her she was almost at the Bar B!

The big house loomed directly ahead on the open mesa. A single light glowed from the living room. In a few moments they were inside.

Always Jane had been impressed by this big, richly furnished room; but now, as she stood watching Nard Burnett spill a quantity of whiskey in a glass and gulp it down, the room struck her as garish—a false note on the wind-swept range. She had a swift impulse to turn and run, get back to the homey, friendly living room of the Circle W—with Dad's battered old desk in the corner!

"Where's Chet?" she asked, moving about the room nervously.

Some intuition told her that Chet Burnett was not in the house—that except for herself and Nard, and the old Chinese cook who would be asleep in his bunk behind the kitchen, the Bar B was deserted.

She had noted only two lone mounts in the corral, and the bunk house was dark and silent. Nard Burnett, rolling a cigarette and swinging one leg, had perched himself on a corner of the polished center table. He fixed her with his glittering dark eyes—and made no attempt to hide the sneer in them!

"Chet went to Silver Gulch!" he grated.

Jane stared at him. She felt herself trembling, and she clutched the back of a chair with her, small, tanned hand.

"But—I don't understand—"

"Yuh're goin' to understand plenty, young lady!" he cut her off coarsely, his face again contorted with suppressed rage. "Are yuh goin' to marry Chet or are yuh not?"

"Why—I don't know!" Jane gasped. "I—I suppose so, but—"

"Yuh're lyin', yuh two-faced brat!" he rasped. "Now I'll tell you a few things! I've stood enough of yore playin' fast an' loose with Chet an' me!"

Jane snatched her hand from the chair. The brown eyes flamed as both hands balled into fists.

"You—you low beast!" she flung

at him hotly. "You can't talk to *me* like this, Nard Burnett!"

"Shut up!" said Burnett savagely. "That uppity stuff don't get over no more! Yuh ain't foolin' me no more—neither is Hank Wovern with his slick snivelin'! Yore precious dad *is* in cahoots with this Kildare devil!

"Yeah—an' I'll give you the whole of it! Yuh've been workin' right along with 'em, hornin' in here with yore pretty face! Yeah! 'Stead of me wantin' the Circle W, Hank Wovern's been schemin' all along to get the Bar B!

"And while yuh're makin' a monkey out of Chet, Kildare will send in his gang of Border roughnecks and clean up on us—and make it look like him and Hank had nothin' to do with it!"

"You lie!" Jane cried. Her world seemed tumbling about her head, but now she knew Nard Burnett for the scoundrel that he was! She scarcely knew what she was saying, but hot words poured from her quivering lips. "You'll pay dearly for this, Nard Burnett—Neal Kildare will make you pay!"

"So that's it!" he said, with a broad leer. The sound of galloping hooves reached them. Burnett leaned toward her, his voice now a vicious, deadly threat.

"That'll be Chet comin' back! Here's what you'll do, you baby-faced vamp! If yuh want to save yore dad's precious hide, an' save yourself—you'll ride to Silver Gulch with Chet right now and marry him tonight!"

He dropped from the table edge and, turning to the sideboard, poured himself another drink.

For a moment Jane Wovern stood staring with flaming eyes at the man's insolent back. Fear, a fear for her father, not for herself, stirred in her; but now a rage as great as Nard Burnett's consumed the girl.

The dirty, scheming scoundrels! And Chet! What a nice little rat he'd turned out to be! And he'd told his father that he'd saved her from Kildare! So they thought they could frighten her into marrying the little rat tonight! If only that big, grim-eyed waddy had followed her on the back trail!

Even in her awakening, in her scorn and rage, a conscious-stricken thought stalked into her mind and made her flush. That searing kiss had thrilled her, shaken her to the core of her being—but what a nasty little fool he must think her—

In sudden panic Jane turned and rushed out of the house. Burnett uttered a roar of rage as he smashed down his glass and dashed after her. She heard his feet pounding through the darkness behind her as she stumbled through the night.

"Stop!" he snarled, as he caught her by the arms. "Yuh ain't gittin' away from here now!"

"Don't be so shore of that, hombre!" said a familiar voice.

JANE whirled around just in time to see Neal Kildare grab Burnett by the collar and drag him back.

With an oath Burnett managed to shake free of the other man's grasp and was clawing for the gun in his holster. The six-gun roared and flamed even as it cleared the holster.

Bereft of reason, little Jane Wovern wanted to fling herself forward, with some mad idea of saving the waddy; but she found herself shrinking back against the side of the ranchhouse, her pulse thumping in her hot, dry throat. In a roaring, thundering nightmare she saw him. He was lying flat on the ground—but flame was belching from a heavy Colt in his hand! Then came a curse, and a scream of agony.

In the deathly silence that followed, and through the haze of gunsmoke, she saw the waddy get up and holster his gun. His hand went

to his side, where there was a spreading stain. But he turned to her—and smiled! She tried to step to him—and only succeeded in falling into his arms. And then for the first time in her life Jane fainted.

WHEN she came to she found herself sprawled in a chair, utterly ignored by the several men in the room. They were Circle W waddies.

She looked around quickly, but Neal Kildare was nowhere in sight! She started up from the chair, a wild light in the brown eyes as her father came trotting in from the porch. She poured questions at him.

"Shut up an' listen!" he said irascibly. "No, Nard ain't dead—Kildare's takin' him into Silver Gulch to the doc—and jail.

"My gosh, Jane—Burnett was all set to clean up on us this very night! Might have got away with it if Kildare hadn't spotted them and warned the men. It must'a been right after yuh lit out that one of our boys left to guard the herd come in, wounded!

"Nard's men had tried to jump 'em and rustle the stock! But they got the surprise of their lives! They was jumped theirselves, with three killed, one of 'em nabbed and the rest hittin' for the Border!

"The cuss that was nabbed squealed—told plenty! It was when we got the news that we discovered yuh was missin'. Neal guessed pronto where yuh had ridden. If it wasn't that things has turned out all right—" Hank Wovern shuddered.

"Where's that little beast, Chet?" asked Jane as she sprang up, her eyes flashing—and a rare light lurking in their soft depths. She had forgotten Chet, and the rare light had nothing to do with the thought of him!

"He was with their men," replied Hank, helping himself to the Burnett whiskey. "Some of the boys are takin' him in to jail. Say! Come back here, you loco gal—"

But before Hank or anybody else could stop her, the loco girl was out of the house and in the saddle of the first horse she came to. She dug heels, and rode furiously down the Silver Gulch trail.

The moon was flooding the mesa again, and she had not ridden halfway to the cowtown when she saw a lone rider galloping toward her. In a moment she knew it was the big waddy.

She pulled up, slid from the saddle, and stood there, waiting, her soft hair shining in the moonlight, that rare light glowing in her eyes.

But she was looking down and idly scuffing the dust of the trail with her toe when Neal Kildare dismounted and came to her. They stood there for a moment; then the waddy put his hand under her chin and raised her flushed face. The half-pint seemed strangely subdued.

"That—that beast wounded you," she said, her voice very small, shaky. "Did it—is it—"

"The doc fixed it," said the waddy. She saw that the grim, hard light was gone from his gray eyes. "What are yuh doin' out here?" he asked, his voice sounding queer, unsteady. "Did yuh see yore dad—"

But he did not finish. Two arms were up around his neck, pulling his head down.

"Oh, Neal!" Jane whispered. "Kiss me—kiss me like you did on the veranda!"

And he did.

NEXT ISSUE

HARD-PAN'S DAUGHTER

A Novelet of Valley Hearts by EUGENE A. CLANCY

Gun Playboy

By JOE ARCHIBALD

Author of "Love and Cusses," "The Widow's Bite," etc.

Hattie Pringle Rides Herd Over Milldew and Cuts a Gun-Throwing Badman Out of a Great Romantic Triangle!

MRS. HATTIE PRINGLE, female tycoon of the town of Milldew, drove up in front of the Elite Barber Shop and extricated herself from her Model T with more than a little difficulty. Hattie had heard a rumor while she had been over to the T-Bone Ranch, a cow outfit she owned along with most of the other real estate in that part of Montana. Hattie squinted at little black painted letters on the plate glass of the tonsorial wikiup's window. They had not been there long. They said: MANICURIST.

"Well, I'm a dinged dong dodo,"

Hattie sniffed, and pushed her hat brim up over her eyes. "That puncher wasn't scalded. What'll happen in this world next? Wonder if they can do anything with this cussed corn I got—ow-w-w, there it goes again. How did that little devil get inside my shoe with that pitchfork? Well, if I can get inside the place—"

Hattie walked into the barber shop and waved a hand at Scissorbill Buckley.

"Afternoon, you old cutthroat. Where's the fingernail farrier, Scissorbill?"

A voice that sounded like water trickling through a bosky dell at sundown answered Hattie Pringle.

"Right over here, Madam, if you want a manicure."

Hattie turned her two hundred and some odd pounds of heft around as fast as she was able and looked at the girl in the starched white dress.

Hattie looked at her hands and snickered.

"Sure, girlie. If you've got a grindstone, a pair of fence clippers an' a hoe, I figger you'd do the job. Bushwash! I ain't got that fancy. Hmm, cute as a rabbit's ear, ain't yuh? Got a pair of peepers that'd make a stone stature jump off his cement block an' rope hisself a cayuse. About a hundred an' six pounds on the hoof soakin' wet, ain't you? Girlie, I smell trouble. When them young hombres get just one little peek at you—"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Why?" Hattie grinned. "Uh-er, a little persnickety, ain't she, Scissorbill? Come down off your high bronc, cutey, 'cause you better get used to me in a hurry. Ow-w-w-w, that blasted corn! Lemme sit down a minute. Whew-w-w-w-w-w-w-w! If I wasn't so topheavy, I'd try walkin' on my hands for awhile. What's her name, Scissorbill?"

"Lucille, Lucille LaPlante."

"No kiddin'." Hattie grinned. "Lucille La—huh? There was a family I knowed once, way back when Pete was alive an' kickin', sounded like that name. If I could get this pan of cornstarch puddin' I calls a brain to workin' better. Hmph, don't matter. So yuh figger on trimmin' us here in Milldew, huh Cilly?"

"Mrs. Pringle, I do not think you are a bit funny. I am not silly," Lucille LaPlante said in high dudgeon.

"Mr. Buckley, if this is the type of person you allow in your shop, I will go elsewhere. Why, I—I was never so insulted in . . ."

SCISSORBILL BUCKLEY ran a practiced eye along a razor's edge.

"Figger you better get acquainted with Missus Pringle, Ma'am," he said. "She owns this wikiup, an' I am two months back on the rent. She owns most all the other vacant stores in Milldew an' them that ain't vacant. Yuh ketch on, Miss LaPlante?"

"I—oh—ha, ha," the manicurist said. "I guess it was something I ate this morning, Mrs. Pringle. Do forgive me, won't you?"

"Yep. Ow-w-w-w-w! What would yuh charge to cut off a toe, Cilly, huh? Well, I guess I'll sashay along. Like I said, you look out for the good-lookin' hombres, Cilly, an' don't get them fightin'. We got a new sheriff an' he's an ornery ol' rip."

Hattie limped out humming "Sweet Genevieve," but the strains of her favorite tune could not make her forget the pangs in her pedal digit. She crossed the street, caught sight of a familiar figure striding out of the drugstore.

"He-e-e-ey, Mournful!" she boomed out.

The long, gangly citizen who peddled cackleberries in and around Milldew skidded on his heels and swung his little noggin around. He grinned and waited for Hattie to toddle up.

"What ails you, Hattie?"

"What should be ailin' you, you ol' bag o' bones! First time I ever saw you when yuh wa'n't limpin' an' cussin a blue streak, Mournful. How'd

yuh fix that corn, with a brandin' iron? I give you ten bucks if you can tell me how to get rid of it."

"Oh-h-h-h, that?" Mournful Meadows said. "Ain't yuh heard of that new stuff they sell over at the drugstore, Hattie? Godfrey, it's shore powerful stuff! Don't stampede the corn permanent, but she shore stuns it. Here, I just got me a fresh bottle. Take a look at it, Hattie."

Hattie Pringle took a swift look at the label of the little blue bottle. It said:

FREEZIT! CUDDY'S CORN CURE FOR COMFORT

One Drop Will Take the Limp Out of a Lynx. Twenty-five cents.

"An' she's no humbug, huh, Mournful?" Hattie asked, with a deep sigh. "I'll buy up the whole batch of it. Just lemme get to that drugstore!"

Twenty minutes later, Hattie sat in her wire-bound old swivel chair in her office, looking as relieved as a pooch that has lost its last flea. A beatific smile on her massive countenance, Hattie lolled in her chair and deliberately banged the toe that had been torturing her for weeks against the side of a big iron safe.

"Go on an' sting, dang bust yuh! Don't feel nothin'. Ah-h-h-h-h, she is the Bum of Gilead, that stuff."

Hattie looked up at the old chromo of her departed husband that hung on the wall.

"She's gettin' to be quite a world, this vale of tears, Pete. Yep, any hombre who can invent a corn killer oughter be made President. Got a manicurer over at Buckley's now, too. She is a gal that files off fingernails an' shines 'em, like them blacksmiths used to do to broncs—blacksmith! I got it! Plant. Remember the old buzzard, Pete? Pliny Plant, the blacksmith. I'm a—well for—what do yuh think of that?"

"Chip off the old block, huh?" Hattie said, and gazed up at the ceiling. "Lucy Plant, ha ha! She's a small world, too, Pete. Lucille LaPlante now. Oh, la-dee-dah. Hortense, peel me a raisin! Bushwash!"

Hattie started, fumbling at the papers on her desk. She sang as she worked. She kept banging the toe that had given birth to the corn against the leg of the desk.

"Oh-h-h-h-h-h Jen-n-nyve-e-e-eve, swuh—he-e-et Jennyveeve. The days can come, an' let them go-o-o-o—That Freezit is a wonder, by crippity. Paint the corn every three hours, it says. Don't get none of the stuff in your stummach by accident as it'll freeze it up. Well, let's see, here's the mortgage on the townhall. Interest due—"

TRUE to the prognostications of Hattie Pringle, the presence of LaPlante in Milldew proved to be a headache to Sheriff Baldy Peake. Quite a tiff occurred at the Saturday night hotel dance three weeks after the nail tidier had put her name on Buckley's window. Two punchers spent the rest of the week-end in the hoosegow after Baldy had exercised the rights of his sheriff's badge.

It seemed that LaPlante had promised both of them the same dance and had turned around and given the gallop to a drygoods drummer. The drummer left town with a mouse under each eye, minus one leg of his herringbone pants and three front teeth. He promised to return shortly and sue the town.

Not three days after that, young Ches Pingry, the Beau Brummel of Bogg's Bend, knocked a citizen right through the window of the Chinese laundry for daring to tip his hat to LaPlante in public. The citizen shook glass out of his hair and barged out of the laundry with a flatiron in his hand. Ches ducked it and it hit Baldy Peake just above the fourth button on his shirt.

Bachelors walked around Milldew with a mooey look in their glimmers. They put catsup in their coffee and

sugar on their beans. One or two married men were caught looking through the window of the barber shop by their better halves and were chased home in front of everybody.

Hattie sat back and waited for worse to come and she knew that trouble would not stand her up. She knew Ches had the inside track as far as LaPlante's affections were concerned. Ches was a comely cowpoke and had curly hair. It was as black as Hattie's taffeta petticoat she wore to church on Sundays.

"Trouble is comin'," Hattie kept telling herself, "an it ain't ridin' a turtle with lumbago. I figger I better talk to Cilly."

Lucille LaPlante boarded with the Widow Smiley at the western edge of the town. The widow was the authority on "Who's Who" in Milldew and whipped up the cream of society for special doings. She was president of "The Every Other Thursday and Every Saturday Whist and Tatting Club."

Hattie walked in on the widow and asked for Lucille.

"I shall announce her, Mrs. Pringle. Have a chair, won't you?" the Widow Smiley said haughtily.

"I think I'll take the couch where I can spread out. My corset is killin' me again, Annie. Wonder if Freezit would—Tell the duchess to take her time. I will just decline on this chase long an'—"

Lucille minced into the parlor a few minutes later. Hattie had her shoe and stocking off and was giving her corn a Mickey Finn. The manicurist at Scissorbill Buckley's sniffed her displeasure.

"Hello, Cilly. What's that yuh been readin'? Billy the Kid? Well, I'm a ring-tailed stray. You readin' . . ."

"Oh, it's wonderful," LaPlante gushed. "Strong, silent men in the saddle, carrying Colts. The Old West, when the man with the quickest draw ruled the land. Even a badman like Billy the Kid was a knight on horseback, Mrs. Pringle. Oh, it must have been thrilling!"

"Huh?" Hattie said.

"Oh-h, to have lived in those days when the Colt was King and—"

"Yuh did, Cilly. But no knight on horseback looked at yuh without lendin' yuh a bandanna to wipe yore nose with. You was a little scrubby-lookin' critter"—Hattie Pringle grunted—"a brat! I never forget the time I put yuh to sleep with a bottle. You had a bump on yore coco for two days after. Lucy Plant, ha! Reckon yuh could find a gent packin' a gun if you keep on lookin', Cilly. Ches ain't bad when he slings a six-gun. Won second prize at the Ski-Yi Stampede in Cheyenne last year."

LUCILLE'S eyes grew large.

"He-e-e-e-e-e did?"

"Yep. Come here to warn you, Cilly. Maybe these hombres in Milldew don't pack Colts like they used to, but I figger a lot of 'em have them hoglegs where they can reach 'em easy. You got to stop runnin' with the whole herd an' pick yoreself out one bull calf an' brand him or by hippity-hell you'll start makin' work for the corpse rustler. Ches ain't a bad critter, Cilly. Knowed his pa, Hod Pingry. He had seven notches on his hogleg."

Lucille LaPlante's eyes bugged out.

"The son of a gunman! Isn't that thrilling! Do you think Ches would fight a man as tough as—as well, Billy the Kid, just to dance with me?"

"I wish you wouldn't hate yoreself so much, Cilly," Hattie said. "Yuh'll never get nowheres by being so shy. I reckon Ches'll put up a fight if any other hombre tries to drag you up to Galilee an' put a halter on yuh. Well, I figger you an' Ches'll get along, Cilly. Don't forget what I told yuh. The bone orchard is overcrowded here now. I aim to keep peace in Milldew."

Hattie lumbered out and got into her skitterbuggy. She grinned when she got it perking.

"Yep, remember the night she was

born. Gunfight not three doors away from the shack. Got in her blood, it did. Wonder what makes me shiver? Better get me a snort 'fore I hit the hay!"

Trouble came to Milldew and no mistake. It came loaded down for bear and its trigger finger was itchy. Hattie was in her office the next afternoon looking over her books when she heard a gun roar.

"Jumpin' Jericho!" Hattie howled, "that wa'n't no sissy pistol. If that wa'n't a forty-five, then I'm no fatter'n a grasshopper." The old chromo on the wall was shaking. "You heard it, too, Pete! Oh, where's me reticule, huh? I got it in my hand. Well, I'll see you later, Pete, you old rip. I gotta see . . ."

The disturbance was taking place over in the hotel. Hattie waddled in out of breath to see Baldy Peake poking a long finger at a tall hombre who stood near the long bar. At the other end of the room, four citizens, with faces as pale as ten dollars' worth of milk, were huddled against the wall. Hattie eyed the stranger who stood there twirling a six-gun in a snaky brown hand.

The years rolled away from Poison Pete Pringle's widow and set her right in the middle of the toughest era in Montana's history. Hattie roared when she got her scattered senses back in their corral.

"What is goin' on here, huh? Why don't yuh arrest that jasper, Baldy?"

"He don't dare, gran'ma," the grim visitor to Milldew said. "I reckon if he pulled his shootin' iron, I'd blow it out of his hooks an' then comb his hair with it. Yuh better go along an' do yore shoppin', fatty, as . . ."

"Why, you—you sassy polecat!" Hattie yipped. "Put up the gun an' then yore dukes. I'll show yuh this town ain't goin' to be shot up by no stranger."

"Easy there, Hattie, he's a dangerous character," the sheriff said. "He just walked in an' got a drink an' then he looks over an' sees Doc Pillson holdin' up a four-spot an' Doc starts moanin' 'cause he needed a five for a straight. This cuss pulls a Colt —fast, too—an' puts another spot in the middle of that card an' says for Doc to haul in the pot. The barkeep yelled at him an' he shoots the cigar out of his mouth. He's disturbin' the peace."

Hattie Pringle picked up a cuspidor, then let it drop to the floor again. Her brain was buzzing.

"What's yore name, Mister?" she said to the Coltman.

"Link Shuff, yuh old boxcar. My pa used to own a ranch over on Bogg's Bend and one time a varmint by name of Hod Pingry claimed he was a rustler and he shot up my pa. That was fifteen years ago an' now I aim to settle things for him. I swore I'd come back and drill the old coot or the pup he left behind him. Hah, reckon I'm about the only real gunman left in the West. I never let myself get rusty with a hogleg. Well, soon as I meet up with this Ches Pingry . . ."

HATTIE'S knees felt as if they had turned to corn meal. Her leathery, albeit soft heart began to do handsprings and back flips. She weighed the advisability of hopping into her model T and going to Butte to get the National Guard.

The thought soured her craw. There had never been occasion before to call upon outside help to run the town of Milldew. Hattie's pride was on a spot. Standing there staring her out of countenance, and she had plenty of it, was an honest-to-goodness hogleg wielder of the old school. Hattie knew one when she saw one.

Link Shuff had a pair of eyes that said — "Danger — High Explosives." His lips were as hard as a pair of harness buckles. And when he suddenly smiled at Hattie, she thought of graveyards and long pine boxes.

"It—it's ag'in the law to carry

guns in M-Milldew!" Baldy squeaked out, "Yuh come along quiet now—"

"Ha-a-ah! Listen yuh poolball with laigs on it, it says yuh can't carry concealed weapons! Lookit, mushhead, I wear this Colt in plain sight, where everybody can see—first they see it, then they don't!"

Hattie's corn started needling her. She shifted her weight on her cornless foot and tried desperately to get up courage enough to throw the cuspidor. Suddenly Link swung his head around.

"Ye-e-eow, what a gal! Where did she come from in this two-bit town? Excuse me ladies an' gents, I think she dropped a bundle. Link Shuff sees a fair damsel in distress."

Lucille LaPlante fluttered her dark glimmers at Link Shuff, when he hopped through the door and picked up the little parcel she had dropped. She dropped another one when the gunman took off his hat and swept it low until it struck smack against his shins.

Hattie Pringle got the shivers again. She knew that Cilly had been outside the door listening to Link's introduction of himself. Cilly's eyes looked like Trilby's after that famous fair warbler of fiction had tried to match stares with Svengali of the banjo eyes.

"Y-you're a g-gunman!" Cilly said to Link, "How wonderful! I mean, I didn't know there were any, any more."

"Oh-h-h," Hattie groaned, "I know it. That night she was born, them hoglegs goin' off. She'll be a gunman's molly if I don't . . . lookit her look at him! If Ches ever. . . . Oh-h, I better see Pete. I can think when I'm close to the old coot. Me corn needs a wallop with the Freezit, too."

Hattie pushed past Link, deliberately sideswiping the Coltman.

"Oh excuse it, please. I ain't got me glasses. Oh-h hello Cilly. Did you forget? You'll be late for the meetin'. Come on gal." She caught Lucille's arm, dragging the unwilling girl after her.

Lucille La Plante went out of the hotel with reluctance.

"Isn't he wonderful, Mrs. Pringle? So handsome, too! I wonder how many men he has killed. He's come to shoot it out with Ches. Just like the old days. I'm shiverin' all over, oh-h-h-h!"

"No kiddin'? You'll shiver when they bury Ches. He won't have no chance against that skunk. You go along home now. I got to go and think."

Hattie remembered the shooting of Link's sire well enough. The old devil should have been shot. He had been rustling Hod Pingry's cattle for months before they caught him. Hattie went up to her office and looked up at Pete.

"I'm tellin' yuh, it's Gospel, you old buzzard. A gunman! One left, Pete. Always one of everythin' left. They tell me there's a dinnysaw runnin' around if yuh know where to look for the beast. Well, there's one Coltman left around these parts an' it's Link Shuff. No rodeo six-gun artist can beat him to the draw, Pete. Link ain't kiddin' a bit, Pete. All yuh has to do is get a good look deep intuh his peepers.

"Well, I got to sit down and get me noodle workin'! I run this town and aim to keep on runnin' it. Wonder if these corsets of mine would stop a forty-five slug? Don't make no difference, they stop me from breathin' anyway. Drive Link out and he'd only come back again. Got to fix him for keeps."

Hattie saw the Milldew *Clarion* lying on her desk.

THERE was a pertinent news item on the first page. The headline knocked Hattie back in her chair.

GUNMAN CREATES RUCKUS IN NEW EDEN

Link Shuff, throwback to the days of Plummer and the Earps and the Hickoks,

walked into the Granger & Cattlemen's Bank early last Friday and demanded that a check be cashed that he presented to the teller, Ike Pool. When the money was refused, Link pulled a Colt and began shooting at the ceiling until his gun was empty.

"Next time I come into this blinkity blanked town," the man said, "I'll get money for this check, and anybody tries and stops me, I won't shoot at no ceilin'. I'm a rootin', tootin' son-of-a-gun that don't like what's happened to the West an' I aim to change it. Be seein' yuh."

Link Shuff was captured after a stiff fist fight and Sheriff Buff Ogleby is alive at the present writing because Shuff had emptied his six-gun. Shuff cooled his heels in the calaboose until the next morning. Sheriff Buff handed him the empty gun and ordered him out of town.

He told the Coltman if he ever came back he'd deputize all citizens who owned a gun of any kind and have them shoot him from ambush.

Shuff left swearing to get even with New Eden.

"Hmph," Hattie said, "There ain't goin' to be no killin's if I know it. Milldew's citizens don't shoot from behind none of them ambushes. I could accidentally run into the cuss with my jalopy. But if I didn't break both his arms, he'd fill me and the heap of tin with lead. Not so good! Maybe Cilly will beg Link not to kill Ches. Why didn't I think of that before. And me so stewed up! Shore, Cilly will fix everything—"

Cilly fixed everything but not the way Hattie had figured she would. If the manicurist had been on an island in the South Seas instead of in Milldew, they would have said she had gone native.

To get her mind off her fretting, Hattie jogged over to a flicker show that evening. She saw the fourteenth episode of "The Perils of Pamela," and her hair stood on end. It wasn't because of Pamela getting thrown into the firebox of a locomotive that Hattie's scalp began creeping, but because just two rows in front of her were Lucille LaPlante and Link Shuff and their pates were quite close together.

Hattie gulped. "I was certain she was to go with Ches Pingry tonight. Oh, somethin' is going to bust open if . . . danged shemale, she's plumb gaga. I'm gettin' out!"

Just outside the Cameo, Hattie saw Ches Pingry. He was walking up and down, up and down, and Hattie could hear his incisors grinding.

"Hello Ches, nice evenin' ain't it? How's about you and me havin' a game of rummy, huh?"

"She stood me up!" Ches yelped.

"I reckon that's better'n gettin' laid out by Link, ain't it?" Hattie sniffed. "Look Ches, you go on home as he is packin' that hogleg and . . . Be a nice feller Ches."

"I ain't running from the skunk! He snitched my gal," Ches howled.

"You go home," Hattie threatened, "or yuh don't get that loan I promised yuh, Ches."

SHE folded her arms and set her massive jaw.

"Keep it then," Ches Pingry tossed at Hattie. "I'm waitin' for Link Shuff!"

"Yuh would hunt a grizzly bear with a willer switch wouldn't yuh, mushbrain?" Mrs. Pringle threw back at him. "He's got a Colt! C-O-L-T, Colt, Ches. I don't mean he's carryin' a bronc's offspring either. He'll plug yuh 'cause that is what he come to Milldew for. Wasn't just for Cilly. Go on home!"

"Like hell I will."

"Oh Godfrey!" Hattie groaned and sat down on the edge of the sidewalk and let her hat, with the stuffed bird and bunch of cherries, slip down over her eyes. She wished that that part of the roof of the Cameo under which Link was sitting would fall in and break his coco. She looked up at Ches.

"Better kill time by goin' over an' callin' on 'Epitaph' Eggers. Epitaph will be preening yuh all up for his

good-by wagon in about an hour. Better get measured!"

CHES PINGRY stuck out his jaw. "Nobody is scarin' me," he bit out.

"No kiddin'?" Hattie said.

She lifted herself to her feet and walked toward the hotel. She saw the Milldew corpse tidier peeking out through his window. Epitaph looked hopeful.

He had his tape measure hanging around his scrawny neck.

Cilly LaPlante came out of the Cameo just fifteen minutes later and she was fairly riding on Link's arm. Hattie felt goose bumps as big as crab apples rise up on her epidermis. She took a big hanky out of her reticule and wiped big beads of dew from her visage. She saw Ches walk up to Link Shuff and shake a fist in the Coltman's face. Cameo customers ducked for cover.

"What is the idea, goin' to the picture show with that big tramp?" Ches howled at Cilly and Hattie clapped her hands over her eyes.

She peeked through splayed fingers and saw Cilly toss her head back.

"And who are you to ask?" the manicurist countered.

Link shoved her toward the walk. He was speaking in a voice that would have cut a saddle in half.

"Mister Ches Pingry huh? Just the hombre I been lookin' for. I'm going to shoot yuh full of holes. Draw!"

Baldy Peake stumbled out of the hotel and almost fell over Hattie.

"S-stop r-right there Sh-shuff!" he squeaked. "In the name of the law."

"Oh, shut up," Hattie groaned. "You're scairt out of yore rompers, Baldy. Jump in the rain barrel! Look here Link—"

"I don't pack a gun," Ches yelled, "I'll fight you with my bare hands, yuh blank blank!"

"That ain't final enough," Link said and he reached inside his coat and produced a second hogleg. He tossed it at Ches Pingry. "Now pick it up, big mouth."

A little piece of white paper, fifty yards down the street, was kicked up by the wind. Link Shuff drew and fired at it.

"Somebody pick it up an' see if there ain't a hole in it! Well, Ches, I'm waitin'!"

"I don't use n-no st-strange gun," Ches choked out. "I—I d-don't t-trust y-yuh L-Link. M-maybe yuh fixed the gun an' . . . I'll s-see yuh later, Link Shuff!"

A man down the street held up the little piece of paper.

"By cripes, he did it! Right in the center of this cigarette paper!"

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" Hattie gasped. "He's twice as fast as his old man was. Ches is scairt, an' I can't blame him." She ambled across the street and her face was as black as the inside of a cow.

"Link Shuff, you get out of town!" she ordered.

"Why he run away, Ches did," Lucille said. "Why, the coward! He brought a Colt for Ches too, Link did. Why, I never—"

"I've a good mind to take a swipe at you, Cilly," Hattie roared. "Listen girlie, that Colt there in that viper's lunch hooks, it ain't got spitballs in it! He's a killer, you sloe-eyed sap! If you was to get sparked by a rattler yuh would be safer. Get along home before I whale heck outa yuh!"

"I'll take Miss LaPlante home," Link said. "Anybody got any objections? Fatty, I'd give ten bucks if you was a man."

Now Hattie Pringle could be pushed only so far, even by a gorilla with an axe in each hand. Hattie swung her reticule and let go of the straps and it caught Link Shuff right in the pantry. Link sat down on the seat of his pants and his eyes rolled. Hattie picked up her reticule and hit Link over the noggin with it. His glimmers almost met.

"Yuh got him, Hattie!" Baldy

yelled. "Yuh're under arrest, Link Shuff!"

"Shut up, Baldy. We only'd have to let him out in the mornin'," Hattie sniffed. "Then he'd go gunnin' for Ches just the same. I got to think up somethin'. Godfrey!"

Link Shuff picked up his marbles and his hogleg. He was close to shooting Hattie as full of holes as a porous-knit union suit.

"I'll get hunk with her," he yelped. "I'll get hunk with this two-bit town, too."

"No kiddin'?" Hattie said, "Bush-wash!"

SHE stooped and retrieved her mammoth reticule, picked up something else that lay beside it. She walked away limping. The corn on her toe was giving her the Old Ned again. When she walked into her office, she grinned and looked up at Pete.

"I got an idea an' it's a lulu, Pete. Figger Ches Pingry's got to be made to make a stand ag'in Link Shuff to save his face. Shore, he didn't have as much chance ag'in Link as a celler-loid dog'd have of buryin' a bone in a blast furnace, but just the same, he looked awful bad runnin' like he did. Ches won't never live it down, Pete, so's he might as well try an' shoot it out with Link. I figger Shuff'll never leave this neck of the woods until he's salivated Ches, so what can Ches lose, huh Pete?"

Hattie knew that Link must have a hiding place somewhere near Milldew. Between the hours of seven at night and seven in the morning, no one caught even a glimpse of the Coltman.

Just twenty-four hours after Link had run a whizzer on Ches, Hattie loaded herself into her skitterbuggy and drove toward New Eden. Hattie did not get back to Milldew until ten o'clock the next morning. There were scratches on her leathery cheeks and on her hands. Her hair was as untidy as a zulu's hut and the bird on her hat looked very tired.

"Been lookin' for a stray," Hattie said as she got out of the Model T. "Figger I know where it's hidin'. I'll grab it the next time out."

Link Shuff lolled against a post in front of the hardware store, not ten feet from where Hattie had disembarked.

"How's yore giblets, Link?" Hattie yelled at him.

Before the Coltman could think up an answer, an old touring car with the top flapping rolled into town and almost went through the door of the Chinese laundry before the brakes caught hold. Hattie recognized the driver as the tax collector in New Eden.

"You hear the news, Hattie?" the little hombre with the red mustache tossed at her.

"Nope. The Maine blowed up again?"

"This is plumb serious, Hattie! Somebody broke intuh the Granger and Cattlemens' Bank last night and cleaned out a big safe. Twelve thousan' dollars."

"What-a-a-a-a--at!"

"Don't look at me, you old battle-axe," Link Shuff growled. "I wasn't in New Eden last night."

"No kiddin'? Can yuh prove yuh wasn't, Link? Got that check cashed I bet. Yuh don't even have no invisible means of support, have yuh, huh? Then how can yuh smoke them expensive cigars, yuh polecat?"

"Poker." Link grinned. "Ask the hombres over at the hotel."

"Maybe," Hattie said. "Well anyway, Link, I got somethin' to tell you, yep. Ches Pingry'll be in town tomorrer at sunset and he'll be packin' a hogleg. Run away did he?"

"Oh, yeah?" Link Shuff's teeth grinned wolfishly. "I can't wait. I'll be expectin' him. Better start pickin' some wild flowers for him."

Hattie walked across the street to her office. No one saw her until late

that evening. The news had spread. The years had rolled back. The bullet-bitten pages of Milldew history had flipped back and life was in the raw again. Link Shuff was going to shoot it out with Ches Pingry and there was only one answer, even as far as the town idiot could see. Hattie sat at her desk when Lucille LaPlante knocked timidly on her door.

"Come in, dearie," Hattie said.

Cilly slid in, the floodgates of her optics wide open. Cilly looked as if she had met Dracula on the way over.

"Oh, Missus Pringle, I've been a fool. Now Ches is going to get killed. I found out I loved him. Oh what am I goin' to do?"

"Figgered it that way, Cilly," Hattie sighed. "Got over yore locoed spell huh? Yuh was just in a coma, girlie."

"Y-you've got to s-stop Ches. Make him leave town until . . ."

"Bushwash! I made him agree to fight Link!"

"How could you? Oh-h-h!"

"Oh-h shut up. Ever hear of a she-male named Delilah? She cooed a hombre named Samson into a haircut. I figger yuh can coo Link intuh a manicure."

Hattie grinned up at Pete. "How'm I doin'?"

"I, wha-a-a-a-at?"

"Yep. Make out, when yuh see him again, that yuh would just die if yuh wasn't goin' to be his gun molly," Hattie said. "Put that perfume on yuh thick and tell him how yuh want to fix up his hooks nice and neat so's he can plug Ches. Now, listen some more to me, Cilly. Here's what I've planned."

LUCY PLANT was listening now. After Hattie had finished, the girl gulped.

"B-but supposin' Ches should kill Link, Mrs. Pringle? I c-couldn't live with no murderer."

"Ches won't kill him."

"Then Link'll come back and kill him the next time—and me too!"

"Shut up or I'll bat you one, Cilly. Link won't never be around after. . . . Oh, go along now an' do what I told yuh! If yuh ain't as good a hussy as Delilah, then we—er—we'll bury Ches. Just think of Ches with his tootsies turned up, girlie. Now get!"

Very little business was transacted in Milldew all the next day. With bated breath, the populace waited for the zero hour. Epitaph Eggers started measuring lumber. The Widow Smilley let it be known all over town that Lucille LaPlante, that brazen hussy, would pack her things and leave her bed and board by sundown.

"Why that Delilah!" she said to a meeting of the tatting club. "Walked right down the main street this morning draped over that terrible gunman's arm like a MacIntosh cape. We will drive her out of town! Painted up like Jed Cooper's new barn too. The hussy!"

Hattie was at the meeting.

"Why, no kiddin'? Why, that is awful, ain't it, ladies? Ain't she got no sense of shame?"

Time passed. Just before dusk, jittery citizens saw Link Shuff go into Scissorbill Buckley's tonsorial parlor. They approached the place with caution and peered inside. Baldy Peake swallowed his chaw.

"D-a-a-a-ang! Gives me the creeps. She's prettyin' up his nails for the killin'. She's a female sidewinder, gents. Hattie Pringle must be . . . ah-h-h-h gosh-amighty!"

Ches Pringry rode into town and got off his bronc in front of the drugstore. Epitaph mentally measured him, turned and hopped back into his corpse upholstering wikiup. Ches tossed a cigarette into the dust and walked up the street.

"Just like the old days, by crippity," an old settler said.

The populace took to cover. Hattie sat looking out the window of her office. Then it happened. Out of Buckley's stepped Link Shuff, his teeth bared to the gums. "Well,

Ches," Shuff called out, "go for the hardware!"

Ches grabbed at his Colt and most of the hidden gallery shut their eyes. Link struck like lightning—missed. His hogleg slipped out of his snaky fingers. *Bang! Bang!* A slug hit Link in the right flipper. Another clipped off the lobe of his left ear.

Link stood there gaping at his gun-hand, a stupid look sweeping over his pan.

"What happened?" Link forced out.

"Shucks," Epitaph said, and went back into the undertaking parlor and slammed the door.

Hattie Pringle grinned, got up from her chair and left the office.

Baldy had Link's gun when she reached the scene of the shooting. Lucy Plant was clinging to Ches and she was bawling like a lost calf.

"Hello everybody," Hattie grinned, "How is every li'l thing, Link? So yuh turned out to be just a sissy. Ha-ha."

"M-my fingers, dang it!" Link howled. "They didn't even feel the handle of that gun. They're like chunks of wood an'—somebody . . ."

"Just an alibi, folks," Hattie said, "Yuh all saw Ches beat him at the draw. A Coltman gettin' a manicure! Think of that! Now get out of town Flossie before you hurt yoreself again."

"I'll be back though," Link howled, "I'll plug Pingry if it takes me ten years."

"Twenty yuh mean, Link," Hattie said. "That's what bank robbers get!"

Cilly fainted. Ches Pingry forgot to stoop down and pick her up, he was that flabbergasted. "It's a lie," Link Shuff yelped. "I never . . ."

"No kiddin'? Then what was the *dinero* doin' in yore hideout, Link? Me an' the sheriff of New Eden found it there this mornin'. It's over in my office right now. Packages of frog-skins wrapped up in nice paper bands that says Granger an' Cattlemens'. . . ."

"I—er—look here, there's somethin'—"

"Can yuh prove yuh wasn't in New Eden that night, Link?"

"N-no but, I wasn't, I—"

HATTIE grinned. "He's confessed. Cashed the check and then some, huh? Know how I found out your hideout, smarty? Yuh dropped the old rusty key to that old shack out in the hills when I slugged you with the reticule, Link. I reckernized that old key. Had it in my office for a long time once, after I'd evicted a Mex goat raiser for not payin' his rent. That was once my property, smarty!

"Lock him up, Baldy. Get him a sawbones too," Hattie said in a loud voice. She got her head close to Baldy's.

"Let the hombre escape tonight, sabe?" she whispered.

"Huh?"

"Do like I say, yuh dumb ox!"

She swung toward Ches and Lucy. "Come along with me, you two."

Hattie Pringle took the pair of lovebirds to her business office. She sat down in her big chair and told Ches to look the other way while she took off a shoe and a stocking.

"This ding donged corn is hurtin' me again."

"Mrs. Pringle," Ches said, "I—I couldn't ever beat Link to the draw. Something is haywire and . . ."

Hattie grinned. "Yuh can look now, Ches. See what I got in my hand!"

Ches looked at the little blue bottle.

"What is that, huh?" he asked, scratching his noggin.

"Freezit! Greatest discovery of the age. Cilly put it in the water she soaked Link's fingertips with and when he got outside to pull his Colt —Ha-ha-ha, it is shore funny, huh?"

Ches plopped down in an old chair.

"Well you old . . . haw-w-w-w-w! Then you an' Cilly—"

(Concluded on page 136)

Branding Fire Song Book

By TEX BROWN

WELL, rannies and rannesses, here we come with some high-falutin' music that's so sad it would make a locoed steer just sit right down and bawl his eyes out.

When we look over the lament of that poor dogie-pusher in the song we begin to suspect that we've heard somewhere before about a man who was in somewhat the same kind of fix.

It seems that whenever there is a pretty gal and a feller gets his heart set on a-marryin' her, somebody comes along and walks off with the gal. Now ain't that somethin' terrible?

You'd think to hear the feller talk about it that this was the first time that anything like that ever happened to anybody in this old world, and that it wouldn't have happened to anybody but him.

But, it's been happenin' for a period of time which dates back to when our remotest forefathers was what the bugologists call primordeal protoplasms, which means a couple o' little one-celled animals that could just barely wiggle through the mud and slime, and couldn't sing a cowboy song to save their lives.

The Tune is Sure Pretty

However, I want to tell you something about the tune. It's a real pretty tune, and it is a lot better than the words. And the way it got mixed up in cowboy songs throws a pretty interestin' light on the early days.

You see, if you listen right good to the music, you'll find out that it's pretty sound, that it has a melody that's really got some meat in it. And maybe you'll say it reminds you of something you heard somewhere else.

Well you won't be wrong. That tune, what's left of it, was originally written by a hombre named Johannes Brahms, who was a top-hand music composer, and whose ditties are considered classics. How it got into the cow country is the story. It is something like how missionary music got to be the basis of Hawaiian folk music.

Some Cowboys Had Fancy Educations

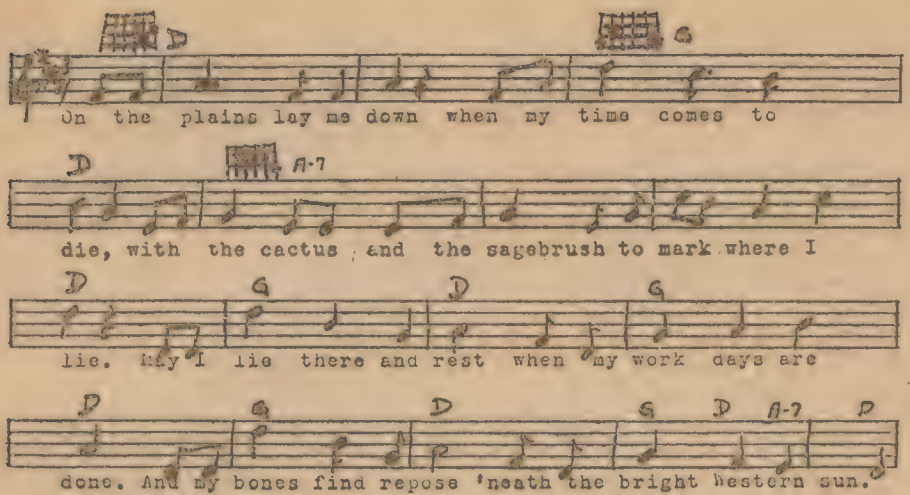
You see when the cow country opened up, a lot of folks in Europe heard about the adventure and the money to be made, and so it wasn't a bit unusual for one of the original old-time cowboys, rangey, a dead shot and a real top-hand, to have been born somewhere in Europe and have come out to the West after he got out of school. So, strange as it seems, you'd run into a cowboy that might have had a fancy education back in Europe.

I once knew a cowboy for about ten years and only knew his name was Brown. Then one day the lawyers located him and told him that since his father had died he was now Lord something or other. The real thing, but he never told it on himself.

So, somebody who knew the classic musicians sat him down and wrote a typical western lament to the tune of a famous classic. If you want to look up the original of this ditty and compare the tunes, you will find it easily. It was "Wiegenlied," by Johannes Brahms.

Git the old music boxes to squawkin'!

WHEN MY WORKDAYS ARE OVER



2

For the West gave me birth and the plains gave me life,
And I helped see the land through its trouble and strife.
Day and night on the range through sunshine and storm,
I herded the dogies to keep them from harm.

3

When my work days were through I would ride into town
To see my dear sweetheart, Sweet Betty Brown.
Her eyes were like dewdrops on sweet meadow grass,
And her hair was like cornsilk, this sweet prairie lass.

4

We were going to be wed and I'd then settle down,
In a home of our own with the range spread around,
And the young dogies feeding, to sell in the fall.
But another man wed her and that ended it all.

5

So I still ride the trails just a-waitin' to die,
No wife and no children to care where I lie,
So dig me a grave where I happen to fall,
And bury me in it, and that's the end of it all.

LOVE RIDES THE MESA

A Complete Romantic Novelet

By TOM CURRY

Author of "Terror Ranch," "Range Neighbor," etc.

CHAPTER I

Dangerous Love

WHEN Ellen Cowan saw Ban's mouth tighten, her heart dropped. But she wasn't the sort to show a hurt.

"If you go to work for Hutch Larkin," said Ban Travis in the slow, deep voice that had always thrilled her, "then I'm through."

Her amber eyes shone with a ruby glow, a danger signal, inherited from her father, John Cowan.

The dry wind of the Trans-Pecos, wild land that had not changed in centuries, rustled her auburn hair. Fine strands of it escaped from under her cream-colored Stetson. She wore an expensive rig, a cowgirl's outfit that Ban's lazy blue eyes had taken in the moment they met. Hutch had provided the clothes, Hutch Larkin, owner of the big dude ranch that covered these thousands of acres, including the Red Mesa.

"I'm going to work for Hutch, Ban," she told him quietly.

They sat their horses at the edge of the Red Mesa. In the distance, to the east, was the weird canyon of the black-watered Pecos.

Ellen Travels the Trail of Gunsmoke and

Ellen's pistol spat within inches of Ban's shoulder

"He's paying me a hundred and twenty a month and I need the money," Ellen added.

She and Travis had been engaged six months. She thought, "He knows very well how much money it takes to care for Father, bed-ridden as he is."

And work was scarce. Ban himself hadn't ridden more than three months the past year, hadn't been able to assist her much.

Behind them, rose the strange Red Mesa, a smashed, tortured wilderness overgrown with mesquite and grama grass. It was little explored, ranged by coyotes and rattlesnakes, a bear now and then in a hidden draw or red rock nest. Dark-red soil, too broken for good grazing or farming, too inaccessible.

"So he's paying you!"

Ban's voice was a monotone, only the taut lips betraying his inner emotion.

"Yes, I've already accepted the job."

Turmoil to Reach Her Heart's Desire!

Ellen was hurt and she was frightened, too, for she didn't see how she could get along without Ban Travis.

HE WAS a tall, rangy fellow with bronzed clear skin, black hair, and a kind face—when he wasn't angry. He, too, had pioneer blood in him, the reckless strain of dangerous men who had taken the law into their own hands, to fight to the death for what they considered their rights.

Ellen put out a soft hand to touch his, which was resting with reins loose in the palm. She felt he was tense, and she choked back her pride.

"Ban, Ban!" she murmured.

But he turned away his face, looking west at the tangled plateau that was the Red Mesa.

"Smoke up there," he remarked.

She looked, could just make out the faint blue column his keen eyes caught.

"Campers, that's all. Hutch's dudes love to get a thrill riding up there. Ban, look at me!"

"More likely someone on the dodge," he remarked coolly, ignoring her appeal. "Plenty of good hideouts there."

"What have you got against Hutch?" she insisted.

She was smarting, fearful that he wouldn't respond to her.

"Larkin's ruining the country, bringing in these dudes," he said harshly.

She knew that wasn't the reason, and she passed over it and put her finger on the real cause of Ban's anger.

"You're silly to be jealous of Hutch. He's old enough to be my uncle. I'm just working for him."

"Yeah? He bought that fancy rig for you. You look pretty as hell in it, but I like you better in—in honest clothes. He's using you as a bait for rich men dudes. You know it as well as I do. It won't do for *my* girl. You tell Hutch you quit—or I'm through."

He was stubborn as a mule. Really exasperated with him, she snatched the modest ring from her finger, held it out.

"All right. Here's your ring."

"I'll smash Hutch's face for him next time I see him," he cried.

They were intent on one another, so intent they failed to hear the faint approach of a rider from the north.

"Look around, Travis," a gruff voice said from behind them.

Ellen was instantly alert to the danger. Here was Hutch Larkin himself, huge, and heavy, with an iron-gray shock of hair on his bear's head. He had hands like hams. Usually, he was jovial and smiling. Now, he wasn't.

He wore a blue shirt with vest open, brown Stetson. Fancy pearl-trimmed Colt revolvers in studded cartridge belt made for the benefit of his dude guests, the perfect picture of a range boss.

Ban slowly swung his lean trunk in his saddle to meet Hutch's narrowed eyes. A brick-red flush spread up Ban's weathered neck to his tight-muscled face.

Hutch's right hand rested akimbo on his hip, close to the butt of a .45 Colt. He had the advantage, but Ellen didn't think that would stop Travis. These were dangerous men when roused, and no one knew it better than the pretty young woman.

She had to stop it! Hutch had heard what Ban had said, and Ban was hot with jealousy.

Ban Travis' long brown hand flashed to his six-gun. Hutch's beat him out, was rising as Ellen gave her bay a spur touch that dexterously put her between the gun muzzles. Both men were too expert with pistols to hurt her and her sudden action baffled them for an instant. Her cool voice checked them.

"Please go on back, Hutch," she ordered.

Larkin kept watching Ban, around Ellen's body.

"I was hunting you, Ellen," Larkin told her. "Got a new bunch of dudes coming this afternoon. That is," he

added, scowling at Ban, "if you're still with me."

"I'll be right along, Hutch. You go on."

Hutch shrugged, looked hard at Ban, tossed his big head as he let his gun slide back into its holster. He was satisfied. He had called the young man's bluff, could have shot him if Ellen hadn't intervened. He turned his back on Ban and rode out of sight along the bushed trail toward his Circle L.

"Why did you do that, Ban?" Ellen said sorrowfully.

But he threw the little ring sailing into the mesquite without answering, turned his chestnut gelding and trotted away south.

SHE was trembling. The wind seemed icy. She watched the dust rising from Ban's trail as he rode away from her. She fought back the tears that burned her eyes.

"Men are fools," she cried to the pricked-up velvet ears of the bay. "Why can't he understand?"

When she pulled into the Circle L yard and tossed her reins to a Mexican wrangler, there was no sign of her emotion. She held herself in rigid control, despite the sharp pain in her heart.

Pedro Gonzales, the wrangler, grinned at her. She had known Pete since he was a brown kid in the country school with her. He spoke American as well as anyone, but Hutch had trained him to use a Mexican accent for the Easterners. Pete had formerly lounged around in torn overalls, an old shirt and straw hat. Now, he was a sideshow attraction, wearing tight-fitting velvet pants, sombrero trimmed with silver conchas, clipped mustache and sideburns.

"Have a good ride, Ellen?"

"Oh, fine."

"New bunch of dudes just come over from the railroad."

"I know."

Swinging along, slapping the neat seam of her starched riding clothes with her fancy quirt, Ellen walked around to the front veranda under the live oaks.

Outwardly, the Circle L was a cattle ranch. Hutch ran a thousand head of contented steers for show. He had corrals and a string of horses, most of them so tame a child could ride them. The cows were never shipped. There was a roundup wagon in sight and various appurtenances to interest the customers.

Hutch was up on the porch, had got in some time before her.

"Here she is! Hey, Ellen!" he called.

With Hutch on the porch stood two men and a woman in Eastern duds. Ellen looked first at the woman, an appraising, instinctive stare which was returned with interest. The girl was about twenty-three, a couple of years older than Ellen. She wore a trim blue traveling suit, small hat and shining slippers. She had raven-black hair, large dark eyes, a skin smooth as cream and obviously never touched by the sun.

"Meet Mr. Ralph Olliphant from Chicago, Ellen," boomed Hutch in his hearty manner.

He slung a big arm affectionately across Ellen's shoulders, hugged her. "She's as good a rider as you'll hope to find west of the Pecos."

"This is a great pleasure, Miss Ellen," Olliphant said.

She lifted her long-lashed eyes to meet the dude's. He wasn't as large as Hutch, but he was close to six feet and must weigh around 180, she thought. There was strength and determination in his face, a grim face, with open admiration for Ellen shining in his alert eyes. She knew instantly that he liked her as he looked her over. She couldn't help coloring and feeling piqued, for the cream-complexioned brunette was superciliously amused.

Olliphant had his hat off, uncovering crisp, brown hair. He had evi-

dently once received a punch in the nose which had flattened the bridge. But he was not ugly. There was an impression of ruthless strength about him, a leader of men, obviously used to wealth and the power it brings. He was the sort who commands and takes admiration from women and men.

He held Ellen's hand till she had to draw it away or look silly.

"This is my secretary, Miss June Davel, and my nephew, Sam Green."

Sam Green was slim, opaque of face and manner. He wore a blue suit, his hair shone like patent leather.

"Mr. Olliphant would like a ride before dinner, Ellen," said Hutch. "I'll show Miss Davel the ranch— Oh, Frank!"

Frank Wells was one of Hutch's young and handsome waddies, kept for the amusement of lady guests. Frank was almost too good-looking. He was suave and he took charge of Miss Davel smoothly.

A SHORT while later, Ellen rode out with Olliphant. Everything seemed to amuse him, the cows and stock, the western country, the keen air. He talked about his trip West. She gathered he was a rich broker on a vacation. He did not say how much he admired her looks, but Ellen could feel it behind his words, and his eyes gave him away.

"Thrilling country," he cried, taking in the sweep of the wild land. "What's that big rise ahead?"

"They call it the Red Mesa."

"Oh, yes. Hutch mentioned it. With the sunset on it, it looks red as blood. I'd like to ride it one day."

They had a brisk canter. He was polite, didn't voice what his glance told her he felt. He thanked her when they returned to the Circle L.

That night there was music. The girls, including Ellen, were there to dance with the gentlemen guests. Frank and other young men were available for the ladies. There were a couple of dozen customers around, and more coming in every day as the season progressed.

A smile on her pretty face, never showing how she was feeling about Ban, Ellen was monopolized by Olliphant. He danced every dance with her. Occasionally, he took her outside on the porch, in the silver moonlight. All in all, he stayed with her all evening.

Miss Davel seemed languidly bored by the attentions of the waddies. Ellen, glancing over her shoulder as she danced with Olliphant, caught the Eastern girl watching her. There was a smoldering resentment in June's eyes that gave Ellen a shock even though June did drop her gaze quickly.

"I'll bet she's in love with her boss," Ellen thought.

When Ellen retired to her small room at the back of the rambling house, she took off her clothes and crept into her cot. She was miserable. She couldn't think of anything but Ban and the hurt look in his eyes. He had been ashamed, terribly ashamed, when Hutch called him in front of her.

"I—I've got to stick here," she told herself stubbornly.

Tragedy, shocking tragedy was hovering close to the Circle L.

CHAPTER II

The Red Mesa

IT STRUCK with no warning. Young Frank Wells, spick-and-span in the clothes Hutch furnished him, went out riding with a wealthy widow visitor at the dude ranch.

After noon, the woman rode back alone, her horse bringing her to the Circle L. The widow clung to the saddle-horn, and when Hutch lifted her down she fainted.

Hutch carried her inside.

"Something's happened to Frank," she gasped, when they brought her to.

"We were riding on the Red Mesa. He saw some smoke, and left me, to see what it was. After a few minutes I heard shots, and Frank screamed horribly. Someone murdered him—"

Hutch was grave of face. This was bad business. He sent a man for Sheriff Tim Wilson, and started out with a couple of men for the mesa.

Ellen stood at the corral, talking with Pete.

"Lotsa bad hombres hide up there, Ellen," remarked the Mexican. "Most likely Frank run into some of 'em."

"Ellen, I've been hunting you!" It was Olliphant. "Let's ride after Hutch."

"Saddle up," he told Pete.

"Aren't you at all nervous about riding up there after what's happened?" Ellen asked, as Pete hurried to get their mounts.

He laughed. "A little, perhaps. But I like excitement. Hutch lent me a gun."

They trotted south for the Mesa in Hutch's dust. The trail wound up onto the Red Mesa, dipping in and out through the mesquite and chaparral. Frank's saddled horse stood as it had been left, reins dragging. Hutch and his boys had dismounted here, and gone up a rocky, bushed slope.

"I'd better sing out so they won't shoot us by mistake," Ellen said, and she called, her voice echoing in the fastnesses.

Hutch bellowed a reply, and they trailed up to where he stood at the back of a rough ridge. Hutch had a rifle across his arm, and they were staring at the stamped-out embers of a cook fire, and signs where a bunch of men had been camped. Frank's corpse, bullet hole through the back of his head, lay face down a few yards from the spot.

"Run into some nervous bandits, I reckon," growled Hutch.

"Ellen, get out of here, it's no sight for a woman."

She was so upset over the killing she gripped Olliphant's hand tightly. He put an arm around her, helped her back to the horses.

"Poor Frank," she said.

"Don't be afraid," murmured the Easterner.

He drew her close unexpectedly and pressed a kiss on her lips.

She pushed him away.

"You shouldn't have done that," Ellen said levelly.

He was contrite. "Forgive me. I couldn't resist you."

She turned away without answering, mounted her horse. He came quickly to her, put a hand on hers, looking up into her face from where he stood.

"You're not angry? You can't really blame me. You're lovely, Ellen, perfectly beautiful. I didn't mean anything wrong."

"You shouldn't have done it," she repeated.

"Come, now." He wouldn't release her hands. "Tell me you'll not hold it against me. I promise not to bother you, if you'll say you forgive me."

He would not let her go till she promised. Then he mounted and they rode back to the ranch.

There was no dance that night. Sheriff Tim Wilson, an old-timer who had been a trail mate of Ellen's father, appeared at dusk. He spoke privately with Hutch, looked over Frank's body, which had been brought in, and then headed for the Red Mesa.

Hutch tried to tone it down, thinking it was bad publicity. Some of the women dudes were afraid, especially the widow who left on the night train. But for most of them, not directly involved, it was a thrill, a Western thrill, something to be retailed back home about the "wild and woolly" cow country.

"It's exciting," Olliphant told Ellen. "It doesn't worry me."

NEXT day, they were getting ready to go riding on the Mesa when a man trotted his chestnut gelding into the Circle L yard. Ellen's

heart jumped as she recognized Ban Travis.

She hurried to him, looked up into his grave face. "Ban, what are you doing here?"

That gnawing pain in her soul paused, the world seemed bright and good again at sight of him.

But it was only for a moment. Ban politely touched his Stetson brim, and looked toward the porch. She realized suddenly that he hadn't come to see her.

He had come to see Hutch who was strolling across the yard toward them, watching Ban carefully. For a stricken moment, Ellen thought that Ban was hunting trouble on her account. A hand hovered near Hutch's swinging hip where the Colt rested in its open-work holster.

"Howdy, Travis," growled Hutch. "What can I do for you?"

Ban sat his saddle, looking back at Hutch. He stepped the gelding closer to the rancher. Ellen could hear what he said. Instead of starting a fight as Ellen feared and Hutch expected, Ban spoke in a low, respectful voice.

"Hutch, I'm here to tell you I'm sorry. I'd like to ask you for a riding job?"

Hutch calculated the rugged young man. Women liked Ban. He was a real cowboy. He had not bothered with girls though, since meeting Ellen. Then, Hutch looked briefly at Ellen. He was trying to figure whether Ban had come to make trouble, or whether he really wanted a job.

"Ready, Ellen?" called Olliphant.

His voice had a ring of proprietorship that neither Travis nor Hutch missed.

Hutch waited to see what Ban would do, but Travis didn't even look around. Ellen bit her full lip. She tossed her head, hiding what she felt, got her horse and cantered over to join the dude.

"Okay, Travis. I'll give you a chance," she heard Hutch say slowly.

"At least I'll see him," Ellen thought.

Olliphant wished to ride the Red Mesa, and they pushed their horses to it. Then they walked them through the narrow, winding trail. Now and then the Easterner would dismount and climb to a red rock pinnacle, to survey the surrounding country.

"Beautiful, beautiful," he kept saying. "I love nature, Ellen."

After a while, she suggested they turn back.

"It'll be supper time before we hit the ranch."

"There's no hurry."

Together they stood atop a huge red butte, horses waiting below. Olliphant put his arms around her and kissed her.

"Don't," she said reproachfully. "You promised you wouldn't."

But she was disturbed, too disturbed by his strength. She could feel his power, and, with Ban acting so, she leaned toward the Easterner. Here was a man who could give her money, really help her father. She was tired of the constant struggle for life, the petty annoyances.

Olliphant sensed her indecision, and pressed his advantage.

"Will you marry me? Ellen, you're wonderful. I adore you. Don't say no. Think it over, if you wish. Take your time."

She let him hold her, smother her with kisses, and she felt a sense of security in his arms.

When they got back, Ban Travis was all rigged out in fancy cowboy clothes. He sat on the porch with June Davel, and Ellen felt a shock when she saw the infatuated smile on Ban's face. Miss Davel had emerged from her supercilious shell and was being very charming—with Ban Travis.

After dinner, they danced to radio music. Olliphant kept Ellen with him. Ban, at whom Ellen now and then cast a glance, seemed fascinated

by June, a type of woman he had never met before. He nodded to Ellen, but that was all. He made no attempt to dance with her, to cut in on the dude. He was too busy with June.

She grew more and more upset and angry. Her cheeks were flushed with color while she forced a smile.

"You're irresistible, perfectly lovely, Ellen," Olliphant whispered in her ear.

Was Ban flirting with the Eastern girl just to punish her, Ellen wondered. If so it was cruel, and her love for him seemed to burn out.

IN THE morning, Olliphant told Hutch he meant to drive over to the railroad and attend to some business by wire. Ellen seized the chance to visit her father. She didn't want to hang around the Circle L all day and watch Ban being attentive to June Davel.

Ban came out while Pete was saddling up her horse. He stood there watching her. She was angry with him and pretended to be busy unknotting a piece of rein.

"Where you bound, Ellen?" Ban asked, stepping closer.

She shrugged. "I'm going to see Father and take him some of the money Hutch advanced me," she replied coldly.

"Ellen," Ban began, softly, "I. . . ."

At that moment Olliphant came out of the house. He pushed between Ban and Ellen, giving the cowboy a glance that was not even the compliment of being contemptuous. Obviously, he looked on Ban as just another paid entertainer. Ellen expected Ban to resent it, but, after stiffening a moment, Travis swung and strolled off to lean on the corral fence bar.

"See you tonight, dear," Olliphant told Ellen.

Ban heard the "dear," saw the kind smile she gave the Easterner. June Davel came out on the porch and Ban strolled over to join her.

Ellen mounted, rode for a mile with Olliphant to where their trails parted. He kept on south and she cut around the edges of the Red Mesa for home.

She found Aunt Hatty, her father's sister, hanging out the wash in the backyard of the little frame house. Her father was happy to see her, listening eagerly as she pretended a delight in her new job. She tended him all day, and, leaving fifty dollars with her aunt, headed back for the Circle L in the late afternoon.

It was 9 P.M. when she drew up at the Circle L and threw her reins to Pete.

Rounding the end of the veranda, she heard a husky familiar voice.

"Why, June, you're wonderful. I sure never saw as pretty a girl as you," it was saying.

A woman laughed. Ellen froze in her tracks, staring through the bars at the figures sitting close together on a porch swing. It was Ban and June! Ban had an arm around the dude girl's slim shoulders and, as Ellen watched, he bent down to kiss her.

Ellen coughed, stamped her spurred boot, and walked stiffly toward the steps. June recognized her as she entered the shaft of light from the wide doorway. The dudes were inside, playing cards, chatting, while Hutch could be heard extolling the virtues of the old days in the West. It was a favorite theme that always seemed to amuse the guests.

June Davis laughed, a high-pitched giggle.

"Here comes little Miss Jesse James," she cried.

Ellen paused, turned toward them. Ban was grinning at the Eastern girl who had evidently drank too much.

She went on inside, boiling inwardly. Hutch came to her, smiling, put an affectionate arm about her.

"Here she is! Missed you, baby."

Her eyes, half blinded by tears, went around the circle of people. Olliphant was sitting in a far corner,

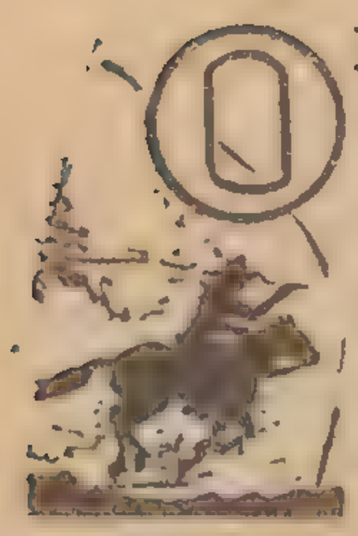
reading a newspaper. Looking up, he saw her, quickly dropped the paper and rose.

Ellen walked over to him, and took his outstretched hands. He waited for her to speak.

"Ralph," she said in a low, level voice, "I've made up my mind. I'll marry you."

CHAPTER III

The Fight



OLLIPHANT was delighted, his face lighting up. "Wonderful!" he cried. He seized her in his arms and kissed her in front of everybody.

Then, the Easterner raised his strong hand.

"Boys and girls," he announced, "Ellen is to be my wife. She's just said 'yes'. And I hope to have a home out here in Texas. It's a wonderful country and I love it, too."

All applauded and began to congratulate the expansive Olliphant.

Hutch licked his lips, nervously eying Ban Travis, who stood in the doorway with June nestling close to his rangy body. The dude girl was unsteady on her slippered feet, and though her scarlet lips were fixed in a wide smile, her dark eyes were filmed by drink. She had on a red evening dress, cut very low, a flower in her dark hair.

From the corner of her eye, Ellen saw Ban gently lean the Eastern girl against the wall and start toward her. His face was twisted with pain. Hutch stepped over to intercept him.

Olliphant wasn't noticing Travis.

"I know Ellen won't want to leave this country of hers permanently," he was saying. "I'm not going to ask her to. It's too fine a place. I'm going to buy the Circle L for her. Hutch, name your price. It'll be my wedding present to my bride."

"Huh?" growled Hutch.

He hardly heard what Olliphant said because he was engrossed in watching Ban Travis.

"Take it easy, Ban," Ellen heard Hutch say.

Travis was walking like a man who had just received a stunning blow.

"Out of the way, Hutch," snarled Ban.

He swept the big rancher from his path. He started at Olliphant who suddenly became aware of his hostility.

"What's wrong?" demanded the dude frowning. "Who's this fellow?"

"I'll take care of him," growled Hutch, bristling.

"Ellen," said Ban, "you don't mean it, do you?"

She was shaken. There was pain in Ban's eyes, and she knew she had hurt him terribly. Tears began to stream down her soft cheeks.

Olliphant sensed Ban's connection with her.

"So that's it," he cried. "He's your sweetheart!"

Ellen nodded. "We were engaged, Ralph. Now. . . ."

"Now you're mine," Olliphant declared, and a savage look came into his strong eyes. "Get out, Travis. She's made her choice. She's mine. You're only hurting her."

He dared to put out a hand and shove Ban away.

The waddy's fist crashed into the dude's face, drove his lip against his teeth. Olliphant was spun around by the impact of the blow. But his rage brought him back, and he was a clever boxer. He hit Ban several hard blows in the body and face, as Ban bored in to catch hold of him and throw him.

The fight had flared so suddenly, proceeded with such speed, that the horrified dudes just stared, open-mouthed. Sam Green, Olliphant's nephew, bobbed up from nowhere, brought a chair crashing down on Ban's head.

Ban staggered, nearly fell. A scream welled in Ellen's throat.

Hutch seized the opportunity to

jump between Olliphant and Travis, trying to stop the fight.

"I'll knock you cockeyed, you young fool!" bellowed the big rancher.

Blood from his cut scalp half-blinded Ban as he charged back with flailing arms. Hutch took a couple of punches and, with his hamlike fist, drove hard to Ban's stomach, doubled him up. His left cracked against Travis' chin and Ban suddenly sat down on the floor, rubbing his jaw, looking dazed.

"Get up," snarled Hutch. He grabbed Ban roughly by the shirt collar, "You're through here, Travis. I was afraid you'd made trouble, you young fool! You're fired."

Olliphant began to laugh. The waddy got slowly to his feet.

"Some day," he muttered, "you'll be sorry for that, Hutch. I'm not the kind who forgets."

He turned, quickly walked outside, without another look at the stricken Ellen.

ELLEN went to bed early. She cried a long time, thinking of Ban and that hurt look. In the morning she rose early, but Ralph Olliphant was already up, and talking with Hutch.

They were out on the front porch as Ellen came out.

"Well, I might sell, Mr. Olliphant. But I have a nice little business going here," she heard Hutch say.

"I wouldn't want the ranch at all," Olliphant told him, "except for Ellen's sake. It's not worth anything much to me. It's all wild land. Most of it is useless, even for running cattle, which doesn't pay on a small scale these days. I've made inquiries."

"I see you have."

"Think over my offer."

"Okay, I'll do that."

Ellen felt listless, as though nothing made any difference. Ban Travis had ridden off the night before, and Olliphant claimed her as his. He kissed her several times, couldn't let her alone.

"I'm crazy about you," he kept saying.

She was acquiescent, unwilling to make any effort to resist. Olliphant was strong, and he planned matters without forcing her to think. He painted glowing pictures of what their life together might be. She would have everything a girl could desire.

"I'll marry him," she thought. "It's the best way out."

The ranch cook packed a picnic lunch for them, and they rode to the Red Mesa again. They penetrated farther into the rugged interior. Mesquite, gnarled in shape, dotted with snow-white blossoms, bayonet and catclaw, and tough grasses grew here.

They left their horses to climb a red rock ridge that afforded a fine view eastward, across the valley of the Pecos. It was breath-taking in expanse, the wilderness. Olliphant wore the gun Hutch had lent him against any danger they might meet, though it was thought the killers of Frank Wells would have quickly left the vicinity.

The dude drew her closer.

"I love you, Ellen. You're a sweet kid. And I love your land here, too. I feel it's part of me already. We must make Hutch sell us the Red Mesa and ranch."

"There are other places, if he won't."

"But this is where we met, dear. I feel it's ours."

The sun was golden in the azure sky. The air was bracing, like an aromatic wine. Ellen, young, desired, should have been completely happy.

But she couldn't forget Ban. The picture of him, face bleeding, beaten, seared her mind. Yet, if she married Olliphant, whom she could not help admiring for his dominant success, she could see that her father had every comfort—

They went back to the horses, rode

on. Near a crystal-clear brook that flowed through a cut into the Pecos, they stopped again and Olliphant took a light trout rod from his saddle pack. He attached a red-and-brown fly to the end of the silk line.

"I'll only fish a little while," he said, "then I'll be back and we'll have lunch."

She was glad to be alone, though her thoughts tortured her. She sat with her back against a gnarled live oak, an old tree that had stood untouched for ages.

Olliphant, going down the winding brook, was hidden from her in the thick chaparral. She stared back at the uneven trail they had followed. A flock of crows, black specks against the sky, veered away from the path. Ellen watched, not particularly interested. Neighbor ranchers hunted strays on the Red Mesa, though the knowledge of Frank Wells' killing had cast a danger pall over the vicinity.

For a moment, she had a glimpse of the rider as he pulled up and left his big mustang in the bush at the edge of the trail. She knew that ornate brown Stetson.

"Hutch!" she murmured, wondering what her boss was doing up here.

AS HER eye lost the giant rancher in the tangled bush, her attention was attracted by a blinding scintillation that was sun striking metal. Someone else was on that trail, not far behind Hutch.

It was Ban Travis, and what the sun had glinted on was a drawn revolver in his hand. He moved in rapidly, leaped off his gelding and plunged into the mesquite after Hutch.

"He—he couldn't!" she gasped.

Ban had had trouble with Hutch over her, blamed Hutch for having lost her. Yet he wasn't the sort. No, he was a man with dangerous blood in him, a fighter, but not a drygulcher.

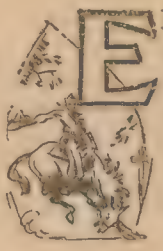
The brook meandered northeast toward the Pecos. Following its bank, the way Olliphant had taken, would shortcut her close to the spot where she had last seen Ban on Hutch's trail. She leaped up, hurried along the path.

Breathlessly, she dashed through the chaparral, oblivious to clutching thorns. The businesslike aspect on Ban Travis' face had scared her.

Harsh shouts burst on the hot, dry afternoon air. She was close to a small clearing when the gunfire began, sharp detonations rapping through the wilderness. She identified the bark of a Colt revolver and the ominous, heavier rumble of a shotgun.

CHAPTER IV

Siege



ELLEN ran on, breath scaring her throat, heart pounding. A bullet zipped through the bushes close to her, plugged dully into a tree trunk.

"Ban! Hutch!" she shouted.

Gunsmoke clouded up from opposing rocks at either side of the clearing. One man seemed to be shooting from her right, several from the left.

Suddenly, Olliphant jumped up in her path.

"Get back, Ellen," he cried.

His face was red with excitement and he had his pistol in hand. Blood was dripping from his left arm above the elbow where a slug had nipped the flesh.

"What is it? What's wrong? Did Ban kill Hutch?"

He seized her in his arms, swept her up, and carried her away from the danger.

"Stray bullet might get you. Travis has gone berserk. He killed Hutch and tried to get me."

"I—I was afraid that was it." Pain cut her. "It's my fault. Ban never

would have done it, if it hadn't been for me."

"Forget it," Olliphant told her. "He ambushed Hutch, from the back. Any man who'd do that is a rat."

"Are you hurt badly?" she asked him, seeing the blood on his shirt sleeve.

"Just a scratch. Travis nicked me before I ducked down."

"Who's that shooting at him now?"

"Some of Sheriff Wilson's men. They've been hunting the hills for Wells' killer. I was talking with them when Hutch came in. And then Travis let him have it from the bushes. They've got him treed."

THE gunfight below raged on. They had Ban treed, no doubt of that. Horrified, icy despair in her heart, Ellen listened to the banging reverberations of the pistols and shotguns.

"That shot may have killed him," she told herself at each report.

But then the single Colt would snap again, and she would sigh in relief, for it meant Ban was still living.

"Will you tie this up for me?" asked Olliphant.

She had to maintain an iron control over her nerves to keep from screaming aloud. The fight below went on with intermittent bursts of shooting. She took Olliphant to the brook, rolled back his sleeve and washed the blood off. The bullet from Ban's gun had torn a jagged gap but only the outer flesh was injured. Her bandanna was clean and she used it for a bandage.

The Easterner laid his gun on a flat rock, and lit a cigarette, eyes toward the spot where Ban Travis was making his last stand. "They'll get him pretty soon," he remarked. "He'll run out of ammunition."

He could not guess her inner emotions.

"Ralph," she said, fighting to keep her voice even. "We've got to stop that. I just can't let them kill Ban."

Olliphant frowned as he turned on her.

"Why not? He's a murdering young devil, Ellen. If he's caught they'll only hang him."

He was displeased at her show of interest in Ban.

"I can't help it," cried Ellen, cracking up. "I loved Ban, and I still do!"

There, it was out! She had blurted it out and she knew it was the truth. Nothing seemed of any consequence save Ban. Her father, Olliphant, all faded to insignificance in Ban's moment of trouble.

Down below, the man she adored was fighting a death duel and he had only a short while to live. In her blood too, flowed, some of that dangerous blood. And she accused herself again.

"If I hadn't taken this job with Hutch, this would never have happened."

Losing her, Ban had turned sour on the world. His feud with Hutch had flared to a finish.

The dude seized her wrist, drew her to him.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going down there to Ban."

"You can't. I won't let you go. You might get hurt. Besides you're mine and I'm going to keep you."

She was helpless in his powerful arms. Hungrily, he sought her lips, trying to make her forget Ban Travis. His kiss was a mockery to her. She could only think of getting to Ban. Angrily, she tried to push Olliphant away.

His mouth hurt hers. She fought the dominant man to whom she had promised herself.

"I don't love you, Ralph. It's Ban. Always has been and always will be. We had a quarrel. He didn't want me to work for Hutch. I only said I'd marry you because I was jealous of that June woman."

"So that's it!"

He was furious, held her by her

arms so tightly it hurt. But she didn't notice the pain.

Every instant was precious. Any one might mean Ban's death. She had to reach him, let him know, if nothing else, that she still loved him. For her, life would cease when Ban died. He had gone outlaw, the fierce blood of pioneer fathers had flamed up. But she had to go along with him.

"Let me go, Ralph. You've been nice—good to me. But it's Ban I love."

HE REFUSED to release her.

"You're a little fool. But a beautiful one. I won't let you destroy yourself."

Hoarse shouts rang on the warm wind that rustled the dry herbage of the Red Mesa. A haze hung in a bronzed sky. Death rode the mesa—death to Ban Travis and the end of Ellen.

She couldn't break free from Olliphant. He wouldn't let her rush down into that hail of leaden death. He was right, was only trying to save her from herself.

She felt all the emotions of a captured creature fighting for freedom, for life, unable to escape.

Suddenly she ceased to struggle.

"I guess you're right, dear," she murmured.

She didn't try to pull away from him but melted into his embrace and her full, red lips invited his.

"You beauty!" he said, and drew her to him, kissed her.

Right behind him was the flat rock where he had laid his pistol. She waited, holding herself in, cunning with a woman's patience and a woman's fortitude.

"You're right, Ralph. I—I love you. Ban's a bad one. I was excited. Let's go on back to the ranch."

His arms relaxed.

"All right. . . ." he began.

The instant she felt she could make it, she ducked under his arm and, with a jump, snatched up the gun from the rock.

"Why, you—" he cried, face darkening.

"I'm going down there! Keep away from me or I'll shoot."

He stared at the steady gun muzzle. She knew how to handle a gun, had been brought up with them. He took a step toward her as though he didn't think she'd fire.

But his eyes, rising to hers, caught the ruby glint in them. His determination wavered and he stood fixed where he was.

"Put it down, Ellen. You know you couldn't shoot me," he reasoned.

"I'll have to if you try to hold me again."

She circled around him, watching him, and he remained quiet under the threat of the gun. He tried to argue, to talk to her, but bursts from the shotguns, the answering bark of Ban's Colt, sent her darting along the path through the bush.

At the little clearing, the acrid smell of burnt powder seized her widened nostrils. Her breath was fast. She could hear Olliphant crashing on her trail, frantically calling her.

To her left, cutting Ban off from the trail the booming shotguns blared. She saw the fire from the thick barrels, dark heads of possemen bobbing up to shoot.

To the right, Ban's Stetson showed as he sent back a .45 slug that ripped a groove in a lawman's scalp. She heard the cursing of the nicked hombre.

"Ban," she shouted, and ran into the thick of the fight.

An awful missile, bunched wads of shot not yet scattered, tore within an inch of her slim figure as she ran toward Ban Travis. The *whoosh* of death startled but did not stop her.

"Hold it! It's that girl," bawled a man from her left.

The firing paused, a grateful peace descending on the bush as blue smoke slowly hazed up.

"Ellen, get back," roared Ban

Travis. "You're right in the line of fire!"

He was crouched in a rock nest, fringed by the spatulate, thorny leaves of prickly-pear and the slim, needle-sharp prongs of bayonet. As she came up she saw Hutch's body in there, still as death, a bulwark against bullets from the back, she thought.

"Ban, Ban," she cried, running to him.

His eyes were slitted, a dull flush spread under his bronzed skin.

"Get away!" His teeth gritted. "I got two of 'em. You go back to your dude. He sent you here to take me, didn't he?"

"You must be crazy, Ban," she gasped. "I've come to help you. Go on, run for it!"

BAN was up, but she intervened between him and the deadly guns behind her. Suddenly, she saw a stocky man, shotgun gripped short in big hands, jump up behind Ban. The menacing figure was only a few yards off. Evidently, he had swiftly circled around through the bush in the moments of diversion caused by Ellen's appearance.

He wore a torn khaki shirt, open at the neck, showing a hair-matted chest, army breeches with high-laced boots on his feet. His eyes flashed hatred. He was taking careful aim between Travis' shoulder blades.

Ellen's pistol spat within inches of Ban's shoulder. The shotgun roared, but the slugs drove into the dirt at Ban's heels and the stocky man pitched forward on his face.

"I've done it," she thought. "Against the law, throwing in with my Ban."

"Go on, run," she ordered again, firmly. "I'll . . ."

Ban Travis grunted, spun on his heels. The report of a pistol rang in Ellen's startled ears, the slug having whistled close to her head from the blank bush behind her. Ban's eyes glazed over and she caught at him as he caved in, crumpled at her feet. A hoarse yell of triumph rose from the hidden men.

"He's down!"

That cry came from Ralph Olliphant. The dude bobbed up from the mesquite. He had a Colt in his hand, a wisp of smoke curled from the black muzzle. It was he who had hit Ban. Evidently, he had obtained another gun from the posse.

She fired an angry shot his way, frantic as she saw Ban unconscious at her feet. Olliphant ducked down, shouting confusedly. Ellen knelt beside Ban. The men suddenly leaped up and rushed her, grabbing her roughly, jerking away her gun.

Through a mist of tears, Ellen saw the lawmen. Two were clad in khaki and heavy boots, gunbelts strapped on, sawed-off shotguns in their hands. She didn't know any of them, but then, Sheriff Wilson would have large numbers of possemen combing the Red Mesa for Frank Wells' murderer. There was a reward up, and blood money attracted hunters from miles around.

Back in the bush lay two others where Ban's guns had finished them. The hombre she had wounded was coming to. She heard his hot profanity as he returned slowly to consciousness.

Olliphant strolled over, seized her wrist and jerked her to her feet.

"You little fool," he growled. "You're lucky you're still alive."

Tears streamed down her smooth cheeks. "All I did was throw Ban off, so they could get him," she thought in agony.

"What'll we do with 'em?" asked a black-haired, bulldog-jawed man in boots and khaki.

Olliphant, scowling heavily, shoved Ellen toward him.

"Hold her, Barry. Wait'll I look over Hutch."

Barry grasped her as Olliphant went to bend over the giant figure of Hutch.

"He's still alive, anyway," he said in relief.

The others watched, silent, guns alert. Ban Travis stirred, groaned, opened his eyes.

"Ellen," he muttered.

"Here I am, Ban," she called.

Travis tried to sit up. A man in a cowboy rig kicked him in the chest, knocked him back.

"Keep still," he snarled. "I oughta kill you for shootin' Buck."

RAW male fury burned the angry eyes watching Ban. Olliphant squatted by Hutch, pouring whiskey down the giant rancher's throat. Hutch began swearing, feebly.

Hutch wasn't dead, but two possemen were. Ban Travis wouldn't have long to live, she thought. He must hang if they didn't finish him off here and now. Ban didn't seem badly wounded. The bullet had grooved the side of his head.

"Take her back, Barry," ordered Olliphant.

Ellen was stunned by the awful events. Barry, keeping a tight hold on her wrists, led her out of earshot. He was a rough man with hard eyes and a gunfighter's cold face.

"Wait'll the boss finishes with that cowpoke of yours," he growled. "He won't walk out of here alive."

"Where's Sheriff Wilson," demanded Ellen. "I want to talk to him. He's a friend of mine."

"The sheriff? He can't help you now, not after that shootin' spree of yours."

Barry made her sit on a rock near the little brook. Close at hand was the path, along it the spot where her fast horse was tied. She sat, trying to keep a grip on herself, listening in terror for sounds that meant they were killing Ban.

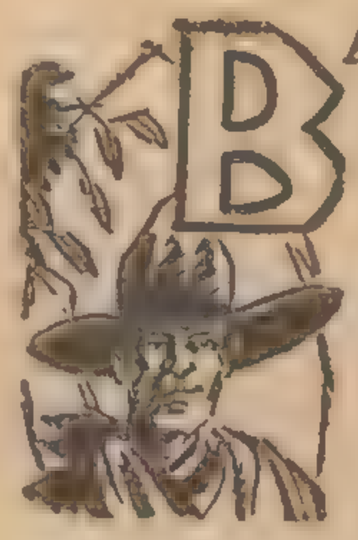
Her guard kept glancing that way, too. He took a plug of black tobacco from his hip pocket and laid his gun on the ground beside him while he extracted a hunting knife to saw a chunk off the plug. For several moments he took his eyes off Ellen, crouching there, her face in her hands.

"It's the only chance," she told herself, tensing for the break.

Abruptly, she leaped up, hurled herself in a swift mad dash for the brook.

CHAPTER V

Red Mesa



BARRY yelled as he saw her move. He leaped up to start after her and tripped on a root. Stumbling to his feet, he realized he had left his gun on the ground and swung back to retrieve it. As he sent a bullet over her head, she threw herself down into the stream and splashed across to the other bank.

Thorns and branches scratched her as she tore a path through. Barry hoarsely commanded her to stop and his gun roared, sending the blind bullets biting the chaparral about her.

Then she was out of range, zigzagging through underbrush, up the slope. Barry was following her trail. She could hear his crashing steps behind her.

Over the ridge she ran, gasping for breath. Down below she saw her horse. She leaped into the saddle, dug in her spurs. Barry fired a shot from the ridge top, hoping to hit the horse and bring her to earth but Ellen whirled around a rock cliff and cut north on the winding trail. She was going to ride for help to keep them from lynching Ban.

The burly guard jumped on Olliphant's horse to follow but he was not the rider Ellen was and he weighed more heavily on his horse. She galloped at reckless speed down trail, passing the spot where Ban's and Hutch's mounts stood in the bush.

A mile sped under the fast hoofs of the big bay, unhampered by the

girl's light weight. She bent low over his silky neck, urging him on.

Two miles farther and she ran right into the arms of Sheriff Tim Wilson.

"Hold up there," ordered the sheriff, sandy mustache twitching as a gnarled hand jumped to his gun butt. He had half a dozen deputies with him, men Ellen knew.

Then Wilson recognized the rider.

"Howdy, Ellen. What's wrong, girl. Yuh look like yuh'd seen a spook."

She fought back the tears. Wilson was an old pal of her dad's, they had ridden the river together. Now, she had to give her lover up to him, for murder, but that was better than having him lynched or tortured. Maybe she could testify for Ban, get him off with imprisonment.

"Tim, they've got Ban—some of your men. He tried to defend himself, and killed a couple. The rest mean to kill him, lynch him."

"Huh?" Wilson was astonished. He scratched his gray hair. "What's it all about, Ellen? Ban shot my men? Why? Who?"

"No time to explain. It was over me—Hutch—but hurry."

She whirled, leading the way back.

Wilson roared an order to his boys. Guns came out. Following Ellen, they started hell-for-leather toward the spot where Ban Travis was held.

Wilson disposed his men in a half-circle as they dismounted. The possemen, guns handy, started in for the clearing.

The place was empty. Olliphant, Hutch, Ban, the others, were gone. Barry, who had been chasing Ellen, had also disappeared.

"Why, there's nobody here," began Wilson, staring at Ellen.

Even the bodies were gone.

"No, look! See the blood," she cried.

That convinced Wilson.

"Shore. This way, boys." He plunged into the chaparral, and after a minute shouted. "Look at this."

The bodies of two dead men Ban had shot had been dragged in out of sight.

A voice that sent a thrill of relief through Ellen called from ahead.

"Hey, come on, hurry up, Sheriff. They're up here."

That was Ban Travis. The waddy, blood on his face, limping from a new wound in the thigh, staggered to them.

"Ellen! I got a chance to run when they tried to head you off a while back. Look out, Wilson, they're up in that split in the rocks."

A SHOTGUN roared from the east cliff face. Confused, Ellen clung to Ban.

"I've got to help," he said. "Wait'll I find a gun."

The battle opened, hot and heavy. Wilson and his men, flanks resting at either side of the black crevice above, lay flat behind what cover they could find.

For twenty minutes, they traded lead. Ellen sought in vain for Ban, who had run off into the bush. Suddenly, she saw a figure high above, over the crevice.

"Ban! That's Ban!" she gasped.

The sun glinted on the metal of Ban's gun. Wilson roared an order to his men to quit shooting for fear a ricochet would strike Travis.

Ellen turned from the sight at the sound of feeble cries for help. Tearing herself away from the drama before her, she followed the sound to where she found Hutch. He had been left, hidden in a mesquite thicket not far off. The giant rancher couldn't move his legs. He grinned up at Ellen as she knelt by him.

Ban's trick of getting above the beleaguered men broke them. They had to surrender or die. Wilson brought them all down, Olliphant, Barry and his mates.

Travis limped up to where Hutch lay and took Ellen in his arms.

Olliphant scowled blackly, stubborn jaw set, eyes flaming hatred.

Ban pointed to the ugly Barry.

"That's the hombre killed Frank Wells," he said. "Wells ran into their camp and they killed him to hide what they were doing. But it's Olliphant who's behind it all."

"That's right," Hutch chimed in weakly. "I got sort of leery when Olliphant wanted to buy my ranch. He tried to fool me, saying he wanted it for Ellen. I trailed him up here, and heard him talking with his men today, so now I savvy what it's all about. They caught me, winged me. Olliphant tried to make me sign over my property, but Ban came along in time."

Ellen wasn't sure what it all meant, but the way Ban acted, the way Sheriff Wilson clapped Travis on the back, told her her sweetheart had done nothing wrong.

Ban kept an arm around her, she clung to him, knowing she'd never leave his side again.

"There's a reward for catchin' Wells' killer," Travis told her. "Your father can have my share, Ellen."

"I don't care—about money."

"You needn't worry," boomed Hutch. "When we get the cinnabar ore out of the Red Mesa, Ban, you'll be rich. I'll set you two up. Mercury's valuable stuff and the Mesa's full of it."

"That's what Olliphant was after," explained Ban. "He had engineers up here checking it over, and gunmen he brought along to force the deal. Meant to get the Red Mesa cheap. He used you to help in the deal, to cut a false trail. And I reckon he liked you, too, as who wouldn't."

He was kissing her, and the feel of his firm young lips thrilled her. She had never been so happy.

"Ban, you were just trying to make me jealous with that dude girl, weren't you?"

He laughed. "Not even that, dear. I love you too much to bother with tricks. But that June woman knew a lot about Olliphant and when she had a few drinks she spilled some of what she knew.

"He's married, she says, back East, and she was jealous of you, too. I took the job with Hutch to get close to Olliphant. Figured there was some connection between him and Wells' murder.

"Back at the railroad they said Olliphant had come in with a party of men in prospector boots, and there was such tracks around where Wells died. I aimed to get the reward, to help out your father so you could marry me."

"I will, Ban."

"I'll buy you a new ring," he said.

She smiled through happy tears, reached in her pocket. "You don't need to. I've got the one you threw into the bush. It took me nearly an hour to find it but I did, Ban. I hoped you'd want it again."

Ban folded her in his arms, kissed her tenderly. Nothing, Ellen knew, would ever tear her from her love again.

To Get Larry Bridger to Ride a Bucking Bronc, Judy Uses All the Wiles of a Cowgirl in Love!

The wild bronc had trampled Larry mercilessly

Man Afraid of Horses

By OSCAR SCHISGALL

Author of "Six-Gun Justice," "The Outlaw Brand," etc.

AFTER the accident everything changed—changed in a way that made Judy Marsh desperate. Larry didn't come back to ask for his old job at the Box M. Instead, he got work in Cooper's general store at Watsonburg, waiting on customers behind the counter—he who had loved the skies and the plains and the mountains. It made Judy furious to see him working there.

"You know you don't belong here,"

she pleaded. "You can't be happy, Larry, unless you're straddling a high-bucking bronc or riding hell-bent after some squealing stray. You are a cowboy!"

Her outburst did no good. Larry Bridger shook his red head and scowled out of the store window.

"I can't, Judy," he whispered. "It's no use. I just can't. I'll never ride a horse again."

"That's nonsense!" she scoffed.

"I wish it was."

"You're talking it into yourself!"

"No, Judy," he went on. "I've tried riding. I've tried it a hundred times—tried with all my heart. But I just can't seem to work up the guts to climb into a saddle."

"You're talking this into yourself!" she repeated indignantly.

"Yeah?" He stared at her with solemn eyes. "There's folks who can't find the spunk to dive into water, ain't there? They may go out on a diving board, but they just ain't got the nerve to jump. There's others—you're one of them yourself—who can't stand on the edge of a cliff. It makes them dizzy and they get sick. They just can't force themselves to go close to the edge. You know that."

Judy Marsh bit her lip and looked away. It was true. She had never been able to approach the edge of a precipice. She couldn't explain her terror, and there didn't seem to be anything she could do about conquering it.

"Riding a horse is just like that with me now," Larry Bridger told her. "After what happened I'm plumb saddle shy. Every time I walk up to a horse I get paralyzed."

When she sent her horse loping homeward, Judy felt miserable. She didn't know what to do about Larry, but she knew he'd never be happy this way. He had been a good rider—one of the best bronc busters the Box M had ever hired—until he tried to ride Firefly.

Firefly was a man-killer; the wildest mustang ever to come to the Box M. Larry had been trying to break him in the corral when the cinch had snapped. The horse hadn't been content to see the man go sprawling. Ears laid back, the wild bronc had trampled Larry, had broken his left leg and had ripped a terrible gash in his chest before the boys could get to the horse.

BEFORE that accident Judy had known, with quiet confidence, that some day she would marry Larry Bridger. Her father seemed to suspect it, too. He'd look at Larry in a queer way and he'd chuckle. And once he had said to Judy:

"You ain't makin' a mistake, honey. I don't know as there's any hombre I'd rather see take over the Box M with you than Larry."

But all that belonged to another day. A cheerful day. Now Larry couldn't mount a horse. He who had won rodeo prizes thought he wasn't good for anything but to stand behind the counter of Cooper's general store. And she knew a saddle-shy man couldn't run the Box M. So this seemed the end of a perfect dream.

The worst of it was that Larry had actually tried to ride — and failed. Judy knew because people in Watsonburg had told her. Sometimes at night, he would secretly saddle a horse behind the Cooper store, glance around to make sure that nobody was watching, then grab the saddle-horn and even poise one foot in a stirrup. Folks peering from their windows would watch him. They'd see his body go tense.

But nothing happened. He couldn't muster up the last bit of courage to climb into that saddle. After a while his shoulders would slump. He'd look at the ground and shake his head. Then he'd unsaddle the horse and limp back dejectedly into the store. That happened often, and Judy heard the stories with increasing despair.

Then, late one Sunday afternoon

at the Box M, she was driving a pair of lively bays that were hitched to a buckboard. Something—maybe a rattlesnake — frightened the team, and they bolted. She couldn't stop them. They galloped half a mile before Eddie Blaine and "Hippy" Dunlop, two Box M cowpunchers, overtook them. They grabbed the reins, and brought the bays to a steaming, rearing halt.

Judy hurt her wrist in the runaway. Back at the ranchhouse it had to be taped. But she didn't mind that. In fact, she didn't mind the whole incident. Her eyes were bright and her heart banged with new hope. A wild idea came to her.

"Dad," she said breathlessly to old Pop Marsh, "you've got to do something for me tonight. You've got to help!"

"Hey?" He squinted at her. "How?"

Then she realized she was afraid to tell him. She knew he'd forbid the reckless plan.

"Ride into town," she said. "Larry always sits on the store porch Sunday nights and smokes his pipe. Talk to him, try to get him to ride. He thinks the world of anything you say."

Pop Marsh dubiously stroked his gray mustache. He said he didn't think talking would do any good; he'd talked to Larry before. But Judy was so insistent that he shrugged and agreed to make another effort. After all, she'd had a hard time today with that runaway team and he wanted to please her.

So he rode off in the darkness. Ten minutes after he had gone Judy hitched the nervous bays to the buckboard.

The Box M cowpunchers protested vigorously. "What you tryin' to do?" they cried. "Commit suicide?" But she refused to listen. In fact, she was too excited even to hear. She climbed into the buckboard, waved to the men, and drove off toward Watsonburg.

"I'll be all right," she called back.

A hundred yards from town she bent forward to peer through the clear night. She could make out her father's horse at the Cooper store's hitch-rack. She could see her father's lean silhouette outlined on the store steps, where he stood talking to a shadowy figure in a rocking chair.

THAT was when Judy doubled the reins and whipped them smartly, again and again, across the flanks of the nervous bays. She knew exactly what would happen. And it did. Once more they bolted!

They went thundering crazily along Watsonburg's only street. Judy braced herself, pulled madly on the reins, and screamed in alarm. Her hat blew off and her hair streamed behind her. She knew there'd be no children out at this hour, and older folks could scramble out of the way.

By the time she passed the Cooper store the bays were galloping so furiously that she didn't dare even glance toward Larry. She was pallid. She could hear her father's terrified roar.

"Judy!" he screamed.

The maddened horses pounded right through Watsonburg and raced out upon the open range. The buckboard careened crazily. But Judy was wildly happy. She knew what to expect. Larry, seeing her go by, would forget all his terrors. He'd leap into the saddle of her father's horse and come after her. . . .

Then Judy all but shouted for joy. She could hear the pursuing horse at her back. She didn't dare turn her head to look. She half rose, pulling on the reins with all her strength.

The rider passed her, leaned out of his saddle and caught the reins of the bays. Staring at him, Judy parted her lips and almost collapsed in dismay. It wasn't Larry. It was her father!

"What in thunder!" yelled Pop Marsh when at last the team had been stopped and Judy could leap to the ground. "What in the name o' thunder *is* all this?"

"Where's Larry?" Judy gasped.

"Larry?" Pop Marsh was still struggling with the rearing bays. "To hell with Larry! I'm askin'—"

"Wasn't he on the porch?" she cried.

"No!" raged her father. "He wasn't! I was talkin' to Tom Cooper when you streaked by. What's the idea o' hitchin' up these crazy bays again? You knew doggone well—" Then Pop Marsh must have understood, for he abruptly stopped talking. He stood holding the bays and gaping at her, his eyes stunned. "By blazes!" he whispered at last. "So that's it! Why, you silly little idjit, d'you know where Larry Bridger is tonight?"

"Wh-where?" Judy sputtered.

"Ol' Man Cooper was just tellin' me. Eddie Blaine rode into town a while back an' told Larry how you'd been in a runaway this afternoon, an' your wrist was hurt. An' Eddie figured maybe you'd busted it. Larry turned dead white when he heard that. He streaked out behind the house an' he didn't even stop to saddle Cooper's horse. He just jumped onto its bare back an' lit out for the Box M like a bat out o' hell! He's prob'ly there now!"

GUN PLAYBOY

(Concluded from page 113)

"Yep. If you have a first born, Ches, and it's a shemale, name it Delilah. Well, Link'll be a long ways from here in the mornin' an' there's nothin' more to worry about. He'll be a wanted man, ha ha! I'm even goin' to have reward dodgers printed an' tacked up!"

"I don't understand Hattie," the girl said. "He's in jail. He'll be tried an' convicted."

"Bushwash, girlie! Link didn't rob that bank!"

Ches fanned himself with his hat.

"Please, I can't stand no more. Then why, how—" Lucy said.

"Clippin' a killer's claws ain't no use if yuh don't keep 'em clipped," Hattie said. "You forget I'm a director of the Granger and Cattlemens' Bank. I went over there an' took the money myself. Oh, me an' the president of the bank, Lucius Holloway. I'll take it back tomorrer mornin'. Any more questions?"

Ches sat there with his mouth wide open for fully five minutes before he spoke.

"Nope. I reckon not. Wonder what'll happen to the next hombre that tries to run this town, huh?"

"About that loan, Ches. Better get five hundred," Hattie said. "Two can live as cheap as one, but only half as good. Run along now."

Hattie Pringle, when the love birds had gone, looked up at the likeness of Poison Pete Pringle.

"How'm I doing, you old buzzard?" she asked.

Maybe it was because Hattie set her foot down a little too hard when she took another step close to the wall. Anyway, the old chromo started shaking a little. Maybe Pete was laughing.

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

ROMANCE RIDES THE RIO

A Complete Novel by JACKSON COLE

YES, fellas an' gals, cowpokes shore loves havin' their fun, bein' plumb husky an' healthy an' leadin' outdoor lives what makes th' blood warm an' rich with vigor. An' when I say cowpokes I'm meanin' both fellas an' gals, fer our ranch gals knows a heap o' ways o' pullin' off jokes on other people.

Them crazy stunts ain't never meant tuh be cruel or mean, but any fella or gal that cain't "take it" don't git far with our cow country folks.

And I reckon that's th' way all over Creation, wherever fellas an' gals gits together an' feelin' top-hand physical exuberance. Most cowboy jokes is allers connected, some way or other, with broncs or saddles or big game or sech like, callin' fer plenty action what tests both muscles an' nerve. Th' range never ain't no place for weaklin's.

But, on th' other hand, when a bunch o' cowboys an' their gals gits after a new fella an' starts them tricks, they ain't out tuh fight 'im, no time. Ef he gits wild-eyed an' plumb hostile, they jest skins outa sight, hides an' chuckles till he gits over his mad. An', most times, by then he's laffin' hisownself an' ready tuh pull stunts on th' next newcomer.

Tales Hard to Swaller

Take th' time Johnny Wales joined up with our Diamond A outfit down in Arizony. He war long an' lanky an' blue-eyed an' snortin' tuh show off—an' shore our meat, him bein' thataway by nature.

He claimed he'd rode "Steamboat" up at th' Frontier Days Rodeo in Cheyenne an' stuck tight, winnin' over ev'rybody else. Well, mebbe somebody's done stuck on that old outlaw rodeo bronc an' kept his head on his shoulders an' his tail in th' saddle plumb tuh th' finish gun, but I ain't never heerd that man's name. And he done claimed tuh've killed a runnin' elk, with a six-gun, at two hunderd yards, firin' offhand, one shot. An' he claimed tuh've rode with Kit Carson, who died back in May, 1868; an' rode with Wild Bill Hickok, who was dry-gulched by Jack McCall up in Deadwood, South Dakota, August 2, 1876.

From that yuh kin see that it war seventy years ago when Kit Carson passed out, an' sixty-two year ago when McCall's bullet ended th' life of th' "Prince o' Pistoleers." Johnny Wales bein' only in his late twenties, us folks found his yarns sorta hard tuh swaller. An' he shore had a string of 'em.

We Got tuh Work Secret

Warn't no use facin' 'im down. Thing war tuh plan good strategy that'd show 'im th' error of his ways an' mebbe cure 'im of tryin' tuh pose before one an' all as th' world's greatest he-man hombre that ever was.

'Course, we let's our gals in on things, they havin' plenty wise *cabesas* in sech cases an' lovin' fun. So we squatted behind th' bunkhouse coupla times an' fixed things up neat an' proper. Then we got tuh work, secret.

Few days later, a young Mex comes racin' up tuh th' ranch with a scrawled note signed by Blondie, Dude Chaney's gal, sayin' outlaws had kidnaped her an' would we come

at onct an' rescue her, pronto, tellin' us jest where we could find her in th' hills.

Well, our plans had Dude hisself sick a-bed an' two of us pretendin' nursin' what he told us war a busted leg. Th' boss come in and ordered th' rest of us tuh git ridin' hard an' tuh shoot tuh kill, but each fella was tuh ride alone an' search special places, Johnny Wales bein' the lone one who'd foller Blondie's trail direct intuh th' hills. 'Course, our boss was in on our deal, but a plumb good actor that minute.

Away We Busts

So away we all busts, ridin' far an' wide but keepin' Johnny Wales in sight. He was give a bronc that'd pitch ef th' rear cinch war tightened too much—an' coupla us seen tuh that.

That bronc war only a fair-tuh-middlin' bucker, but he shore made Johnny grab leather as th' two went hurtlin' fer th' hills, where's a big canyon jest inside an' where Blondie's note told us she war bein' held captive.

Well, we war all top uv a hill as Johnny busted intuh that canyon, his gun held high over his shoulder. I'll shore have tuh admit that young fella had real nerve. But jest as he entered th' canyon, full speed ahaid, he slid tuh a halt, staring hard.

Some Greetin' Party!

Right there before his eyes stood a form lookin' jest like Wild Bill Hickok, long mustache an' hair an' all th' trimmin's, holdin' two guns waist high. And 'crost from him stood old Kit Carson in fur cap an' fringed clothes, also grippin' guns. We'd shore made them old-timers lifelike. On Wild Bill's form we'd hung a sign sayin' "Killed in 1876. How old was yuh then, Johnny?"

An' hangin' from Kit Carson's neck was a similar sign tellin' how he died back in 1868 an' askin' Johnny th' same question. An' our big, aged, iron-gray wagon-hoss, Muley, war hitched tuh a bush, with a sign on his side readin' "Steamboat, rode by Johnny Wales bareback—the dare devil of all Arizony."

An' roped tuh a cottonwood clost by war a form like Blondie's, from Stetson tuh spurs, her straw arms poked out as ef she war pleadin' fer rescue.

Her sign read, "Johnny, save me!" An' layin' at her feet war a nice, striped—skunk, what eyed Johnny solemn-like an' started risin' up sorta suspicious, turnin' his back toward Johnny like he felt insulted by human presence. How that skunk got there, we never knowed.

'Course, Dude an' Blondie war with us, watchin' an' grinnin'. Dude shouted down:

"Need any help, Johnny?"

An' Blondie yelled, too:

"Save me, Johnny! Don't let 'em take me away!"

Johnny glared up at us, but jest then that durned skunk started talkin' rough tuh Johnny, in his skunky way. Johnny swung his bronc towards home an' shore lit out, hopin' th' breez'd let 'im breathe natural, but us folks dassen't foller 'im too durned close behind. That breeze was shore a-talkin' mean. We had tuh scatter wide an' beat it pronto.

He Could Take It

Still an' all, folks, Johnny had th' inner makin's an' knowed how tuh take fun. When we got back tuh th' ranch, danged ef he hadn't piled all our beddin' in th' centre of th' bunkhouse an' turned on th' boss's garden hose over th' hull works. Besides which, he'd gone an' throwed his skunk clothes right on top!

We lit out tuh trail 'im down an' duck 'im in th' waterin' trough, but—he was sittin' in it already, plumb naked as th' day he war born, an' scrubbin' hisself with a big cake o' yaller laundry soap. An' was he grinnin'? Durn 'im, took us 'most a week afore that bunkhouse could be used agin.

He Became a Policeman

Last time I seen Johnny war sev-'ral years ago when me an' coupla our boys went intuh El Paso tuh

spend a few days in civilization, feelin' sorta tired singin' tuh white-faces an' cactus plants. He war on th' police force, a big badge gleamin' on his chest an' orderin' folks an' autymobiles where tuh go an' how tuh turn—plumb officious. When he seen us he grins an' says:

"Hullo, boys. How's—skunks?" He pointed tuh a bar across th' street. It shore had plumb fancy bottles filled with red-eye in its winders. "That's my brother's place, fellas," he tells us. "Romp in an' th' drinks is on me an' Wild Bill an' Kit Carson an' old Steamboat. Tell my brother it's okay up tuh four drinks apiece."

We grins proper at that, an' heads fer his brother's almost at a jog-trot, we're that thirsty. But he calls after us an' we looks back, expectin' our good luck wouldn't last. Was he gittin' back at us agin 'cause o' that rescue business? He's grinnin', an' then he says:

"An' then come on up tuh th' house, boys. Blondie'll shore be expectin' yuh. I git off duty in another hour."

We didn't dast look at Dude's face, fearin' he'd show signs o' goin' haywire, but he didn't. Looked like he'd forgot all about Blondie. Then I remembers that he'd got hisself another gal after Blondie'd left our ranch an' war bestowin' his attentions on th' new one as though Blondie'd never been. Dude's thataway. But looked like Johnny'd won th' purtiest gal on our range.

A Plumb Happy Couple

An' danged ef it warn't so. Johnny an' Blondie'd wed up an' she seemed tuh think he war shore top-hand, way she ogled 'im when we gits tuh their li'l house an' sees 'em together, an' et supper with 'em.

Warn't one uv us what wouldn't a-married Blondie ef she'd jest said th' word while back on th' ranch, an' now yere she was, married forever tuh Johnny Wales, durn 'im. An' they told us it'd all come about by her feelin' sympathy for 'im that

(Continued on page 140)

Fascinating, Profitable Profession

NOW OPEN to More Men & Women

If you are looking for a NEW and BETTER way to make a living, take up Swedish Massage, for now you can learn at home. This interesting big pay profession was for years available only to a few. Its secrets were guarded jealously and fabulous prices were paid for instruction. This same instruction is now available to you at a mere fraction of the former price and you need not leave your present work until you have qualified as an expert and can command an expert's pay. The demand for BOTH MEN AND WOMEN has shown a steady increase and few, if any, have ever lacked employment.

LEARN IN 90 DAYS AT HOME

Use spare time at home to master a profession which has made thousands of dollars for ambitious men and women. Many graduates have completed their training in three months but you can take your own time, it need not interfere with either work or pleasure. All instruction has been prepared by the teachers in our famous resident school—the same material is used and a DIPLOMA is awarded upon graduation.

ANATOMY CHARTS AND BOOKLET FREE

No Obligation Of Any Kind SEND COUPON

THE COLLEGE OF SWEDISH MASSAGE (Successor to National College of Massage), Dept. 663—30 E. Adams St., Chicago.

You may send me FREE and postpaid, Anatomy Charts, booklet, containing photographs and letters from graduates and complete details of your offer.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

Sawtooth Harry Says:

TWENTY GRAND RAZOR BLADES are Habit Forming

Brother . . . don't you Never try a Twenty Grand Razor Blade! They're HABIT FORMING. Once yuh feel the perfect leather-stropped edge again yer face, yer doomed. Yuh won't be able to get along without 'em. Keep away from them self-help displays in Drug and other stores in your neighborhood.

5 BLADES FOR 10¢

WORLD'S PRODUCTS CO.

WORK FOR THE

GOVERNMENT

$1260 to $2100 Year

Get ready immediately.

Mail Coupon Today—SURE

COUPON

Franklin Institute, Dept C257, Rochester, N.Y.
Sirs: Rush without charge (1) 32-page book with list of U. S. Government Jobs. (2) Tell me how to qualify for one.

Name .....

Address .....

Fistula Sufferers Face Danger

One of the tragic results of neglected fistula frequently is loss of bowel control together with nervous diseases and general ill health caused by self-poisoning. Thousands could save themselves from humiliation and serious illness by taking proper treatment in time. The Thornton & Minor Clinic—oldest known rectal institution in the world—offers a FREE Book which explains Fistula and other rectal diseases; tells how more than 50,000 persons have been benefited by their mild, corrective institutional treatment—without hospital confinement. Write for this Free Book and Reference List. Address Thornton & Minor Clinic, Suite 656, 926 McGee Street, Kansas City, Mo.

PILES If YOU are troubled with itching, bleeding or protruding Piles, write TODAY for a generous Sample of Page's Wonderful Combination Pile Treatment **FREE**

E. R. PAGE Co., Dept. 421-E5, Marshall, Mich.

DICE. CARDS.
Specialties for Magicians use. Inks. Shiners, Check-Cop, Daubs. Catalog ten cents, stamps or coin.
HILL BROS., Box T, Salida, Colo.

STOPS PYORRHEA AND TRENCH MOUTH

Or No Cost!

New Guaranteed Home Treatment Astounds Medical Profession

You can believe the sworn affidavits of doctors and dentists who have tried this new discovery on most stubborn cases of pyorrhea, trench mouth and bleeding gums.

PYRO was used with startling success many times in cases that seemed hopeless . . . where everything else failed. PYRO is almost uncanny in getting quick and sure results. It gets to the root of the trouble because PYRO has a penetration of ¼ inch in 5 minutes and it corrects and heals as it penetrates the diseased areas. If your gums are sore or bleed when brushed . . . If your teeth are loose or pus pockets have formed, order PYRO today for quick correction . . . act now before you lose your teeth entirely.

A Doctor Writes:
A well-known physician . . . a member of the American Medical Assn. and many other professional organizations, says: "I do not hesitate to state that this solution has saved me from the nightmare of false teeth."

Read This Proof
Mrs. W. H. Kirby, 45 East 66th St., New York, writes: "For a number of years I suffered with an advanced case of pyorrhea, constant treatments seemed only to arrest the disease. I was told I would lose my teeth. Then I heard of this new remedy. Being desperate, decided to try it. Am very happy now. My gums are healthy, teeth tight, and write this hoping that others suffering as I, will try it."

DON'T LOSE YOUR TEETH, ORDER NOW!
We have 45 pages of affidavits attesting to the wonderful powers of PYRO. So positive are we that it will bring you the health and happiness you have been seeking, that we will send it to you without a single penny of risk. Send $2 today for the full home treatment or we will send C.O.D. for $2 plus postage. Use PYRO as directed and if not 100% delighted with results, return the unused bottle and we will refund the purchase price in full. (Canada $2.25 cash with order.)

D. B. CABLE PRODUCTS, BOX 4,
Hamilton Grange Sta., New York Post Office

(Continued from page 139)

time we fixed up them darned figgers in th' canyon.

Sympathy's plenty clost tuh love, an' that's jest what happened. Still an' all, I reckon ef she hadn't took Johnny she wouldn't never have took any of th' rest of us, nohow, us all bein' jest ramblin' waddies without no settled convictions as tuh a home an' none of us havin' much *dinero* in our jeans, them days.

Frontier Firearms

Well, folks, some members of our BRANDING FIRE CLUB have wrote in askin' about th' sorta firearms that war used on th' frontier.

They war several sorts, but th' two weapons mostly seen in them days, after th' old muzzle-loadin' guns had passed intuh th' discard, war th' Colt's .45 calibre, single-action, Frontier model revolver, what had a seven an' a half inch barrel; an' th' .44 calibre Winchester rifle.

This rifle war of two kinds—one havin' a short barrel an' carryin' nine cartridges; an' th' other with a longer barrel an' carryin' sixteen cartridges. Very few double-action revolvers was seen or even knowed in them days.

But Billy th' Kid carried 'em—two Colt's .41 calibre six-guns with th' double action. On th' old types o' revolvers, some cowboys usta remove th' triggers an' shoot simply by luggin' back th' hammer with their thumb an' then lettin' go. Th' powder used then war th' old black powder kind; givin' out a lotta smoke. It war th' only kind knowned.

Before the "Peacemaker"

It may surprise a heap o' folks tuh read that Wild Bill Hickok carried six-guns of th' old cap-an'-ball type, then th' most worn of any revolver. Most men of his time lugged th' same. The well-knowed Colt's single-action revolver, knowed as th' "Peacemaker," wasn't on th' market till six years before Wild Bill war killed.

This new gun made an instant hit all over th' West an' soon was car-

YOU CAN WIN CONTEST CASH!

THOUSANDS of DOLLARS are Now OFFERED FREE

in Big New Camay, Crisco, Lifesaver, Liberty, Newspaper Contests (and others).

YOU CAN WIN! BUT YOU MUST BE GOOD!

WE CAN HELP YOU

FREE
GET YOUR COPY OF THE NEW BIG ISSUE OF "CONTEST TIPS." FREE, LISTING NEWEST CONTESTS, BIG CASH OFFERS, PREVIOUS WINNING ENTRIES AND COMPLETE CONTEST SERVICE DETAILS.

READ HOW WE'VE HELPED OTHERS:

From Penna.: "I want to thank you for my FIRST CHECK in contests."
Minn.: "I won in the IVORY SOAP contest you entered me into."
Iowa: "I won with your entry in the CRISCO contest."
Indiana: "I have won for a name you sent me in the GOLD MEDAL CONTEST; also won in their 2nd contest."
Penna.: "This is the first time I ever received a check in contests, all due to your ability."
N. J.: "Thank you for your faithful service to me."
Colo.: "Grateful to you . . . you have helped me so much . . . I never did have anyone to show me so much consideration."

RUSH COUPON NOW for FREE OFFER

EDITORS & PUBLISHERS SERVICE CO.
Dept. 106, 210 Fifth Ave., New York City, N. Y.

Gentlemen:
RUSH my free copy of the new issue of "CONTEST TIPS" and complete service details. I understand you can help me.

Name .....

Address .....
(Enclose 10c for handling and mailing)

ried by most all men. It war adopted by th' United States Regular Army in 1873.

But I'll have tuh tell yuh more 'bout guns another time folks. We're gittin' clost tuh our limit o' space fer this number. But in our followin' number I'll give yuh th' rest, so better keep this number so's tuh have th' complete story o' them guns.

From Our Letter Pals

Well, now I reckon I'd better git sorta standin' aside an' lettin' some of our dandy letter pals do th' talkin'. An' ain't these grand letters!

Even with war goin' on in lots of countries we still keep right on getting letters from all over the world. Jest to prove it we're gonna start off this time with a letter that comes all the way from India:

Dear Tex:

Every time I see a copy of THRILLING RANCH STORIES my one desire is to read it from cover to cover. I must thank you for the splendid stories in every issue. I am sending you my enrollment coupon so you can put your brand on me as a member of your club. I must say it is one of the best clubs I have come across.

I am 20 years of age, 6 feet 3 inches tall, have gold brown hair and brown eyes and weigh 160 lbs. I have lived in a town all my life but have not got to liking it up to now and I long for the wide open spaces. My favorite pastime is to saddle up my roan "Rusty," get out in the country, and ride or sit and sing cowboy songs with my guitar. I also like swimming, music, and dancing. I would like to receive letters from all parts of the world. I can tell of a few strange things one sees in India. I will exchange photos of colorful India for ones of the West.

James D'Avila.
Loco Foreman,
Cawnpore, Anwarganj, India.

Thanks, Jim. Bet you'll be hearin' from some of the folks around the ole Branding Fire—but it might take

(Continued on page 142)

AGENTS WANTED!

CLERKS and WORKERS in FACTORIES, MILLS, C.C.C. CAMPS, OFFICES, NAVY, ARMY, MERCHANT MARINE, ETC. Rare Opportunity. Earn EXTRA MONEY. 50% commission selling our new Red, White and Blue Enameled Metal Etched, Lifetime SOCIAL SECURITY and IDENTIFICATION PLATES in leather Billfolds. Money and Postage Refunded on demand. For Salesmen's Outfit, print clearly your name, address and S. S. Number and mail with 25c cash or stamps to the largest concern in this line.
WM. NAMENT, 665 W. Lexington St., Baltimore, Md.

WANTED

1,000 MEN

Work For The GOVERNMENT

Salaries $1700-$2600 Per Year

NO LAYOFFS! VACATIONS WITH PAY!

A LIFETIME JOB

Railway Postal Clerks
City P. O. Mail Carriers
U. S. Post Office Clerks
Rural Mail Carriers

So sure are we that our simplified Interstate Home Study Courses of coaching will result in your passing the examinations and being appointed that we are willing to accept your enrollment on the following basis. The price of our complete 10-week lesson course is $30 plus $3 Examiners' Fee.

We are willing to give you any course with the understanding that you are to pay for the Course ONLY AFTER YOU ARE APPOINTED AND WORKING. Should you take the examination and fail, or not be appointed for any reason whatsoever, the loss will be ours and you will not owe us one cent for the course.

Pay for Course Only After You Are Appointed & Working

So Get Started TODAY — WORK FOR UNCLE SAM!

Clip and Mail This Coupon NOW!

INTERSTATE HOME STUDY BUREAU S.M.4
901 BROAD ST., DIV. S.M.4, NEWARK, N. J.

Please RUSH me the full particulars of your 10-week lesson course. It is understood that I am not to pay for the course until I am appointed and working. I am interested in (check box):

☐ City P. O. Mail Carrier ☐ Rural Mail Carrier
☐ Railway Mail Clerk ☐ P. O. Clerk

Name.....
(Please print plainly in pencil)

Address.....

City..... State.....

If you wish Paste on Postcard and Mail.

(Continued from page 141)

right considerable time for their letters to reach yuh in India.

About now there comes the time when old Tex better start in doin' his silent cheerin' for all of those of yuh what get up and speak yore piece in front of the crackling flames and the gang. Thataway there's room for more of yore letters—but there just ain't never room for all of them we'd like to print.

Dear Tex:

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for quite some time and think it is swell. I am 25 years old, have brown eyes and brown hair and weigh 182 lbs. Sports and stamp collecting are my favorite hobbies. I would like to hear from anyone between the ages of 18 and 25. Will answer all letters and exchange snapshots. Sincerely,

Vincent Becker.
74 Eight Street, Newark, Ohio.

Dear Tex:

I wish to join your BRANDING FIRE CLUB. I have read several issues of THRILLING RANCH STORIES and have enjoyed them very much. I am a young girl of 15, weigh 105 lbs., 5 feet 2 inches tall, brown hair and light brown eyes. I wish to hear from any of those around the BRANDING FIRE from 15 to 18. I will try to answer all letters that I receive, so please write a lonely girl from Santa Fe.

Lucas Gonzalez.
Box 1300 Canyon Road,
Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Dear Tex:

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES and enjoy them very much, they are all thrilling and exciting. Gee, I'd sure like to hear from all the Branding Fire readers. Am 21, blue eyes and brown hair. Height 5 feet 9½ inches, weigh 168. I play a harmonica and guitar, sing and yodel. Will exchange songs and photos. My hobbies are roller and ice skating, dancing, swimming, etc. I will answer all letters. Here's also wishing your magazine all success in the world.

Stanley Mahalak.
646 Grove St., Wyandotte, Michigan.

Dear Tex:

I have been a constant reader of THRILLING RANCH STORIES for the past three and a half years and I certainly think it "the tops." I have always liked to read the letters sent you by the members of the BRANDING FIRE CLUB and have often wondered if I could join. I know if I could receive a lot of letters from members it sure would brighten up many dull hours.

I am at this time in a sanatorium for

tuberculosis and even though I am well enough to go out around the grounds things do get quite dull, as there is very little to see and absolutely nothing to do, so you may be sure that I would like to hear from a lot of pen pals from all over the world, both fellows and girls, young and old, so come on and write. I try to collect stamps, so if any of you stamp collectors have some "extras" that you have no use for, please send them along to me, I sure will appreciate them. Collecting stamps is a great hobby but being ill as I am I find them hard to get. Sincerely,

Noel A. Sampson.

Fair View Sanatorium,
New Lisbon, N. J.

Dear Tex:

When a person reads a THRILLING RANCH STORIES once they go to their dealer and say, give me nothing but the best, give me T. R. S. every time.

Now about myself. I am 32 years old, 5 feet 11½ inches tall, weigh 200 lbs. Have brown hair and eyes. Would like to hear from those around my own age and will answer all letters promptly because I work nights and have plenty of time. So here's hoping for some pen pals.

C. J. Barney.

General Delivery, Lopur, Michigan.

Dear Tex:

I am an old THRILLING RANCH STORIES reader and I am very fond of books. My hobbies are reading and dancing. I'm 18 years old with black hair and dark blue eyes, 5 feet 4 inches tall, weigh 127 lbs. I would like to hear from anyone from everywhere. Sincerely,

Lillian Johnson.

Halls, Tenn.

Join Our Club

After readin' all them, folks, it shore makes us feel we want tuh have their writers come intuh our BRANDING FIRE CLUB ef they ain't joined us yit, eh?

All anybody's gotta do is tuh fill out th' coupon on page 144 an' mail it in tuh us, enclosin' a self-addressed an' stamped return envelope, an' we'll mail yuh yore free membership card right off th' bat.

Then we'll all be ridin' high, wide an' han'some, boot tuh boot, an' yellin' "Yippee" on our way. Shore thing!

Our Next Issue

An' keep watchin' for our next number, fellas an' gals. We're gonna

(Concluded on page 144)

ONLY 8¢ A DAY

Buys Famous Allstate Auto Insurance Policy

That's all! Only about 8c a day is average cost of Allstate Automobile Insurance Policy in most states. Allstate was organized years ago by Sears, Roebuck and Co. to meet the needs of the American car owner. Your Allstate Policy may save you a substantial sum, because in most states, Allstate's rates are considerably lower than listed manual rates. In a few states Allstate issues a participating policy at manual rates on which it has paid substantial dividends to policyholders. You may take six months to pay your premiums. And you enjoy the protection with a sound, reliable company, known for its fair policy of settling all claims promptly, and for promptly paying legally assessed damages for bodily injury, loss of life and property, in accordance with the terms of your policy. Other features: protection when you drive cars belonging to others; up to $5.00 a day reimbursed you for other transportation, up to 30 days, if your car is stolen; Passenger Medical Insurance at slight extra cost (in states where permitted); full insurance against fire, theft, collision. Write today for rates on your automobile. Simply copy down from your State License Card all the information about your car such as make, year, model, motor number, serial number, etc. Send this information today to Allstate Insurance Company, 20 N. Wacker Drive, Desk C-26, Chicago, Illinois.

YOU CAN TRAIN TO Be an ARTIST

LEARN to DRAW at HOME in YOUR SPARE TIME!
Trained Artists are capable of earning $30, $50, $75 a week. Our practical, spare-time training makes it fun to learn COMMERCIAL ART, ILLUSTRATING and CARTOONING, all in one course. No previous training necessary. Write today for details in free book, "Art for Pleasure & Profit." State age.
STUDIO 666-P, WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF ART
1115—15th ST., N. W., WASHINGTON, D. C.

PATENT YOUR IDEA

OTHER MEN have read and profited by our free books "Patent Protection" and "Selling an Invention." Fully explain many interesting points to inventors and illustrate important mechanical principles. With books we also send free "Evidence of Invention" form. Reasonable fees, deferred payments, forty-two years experience. Write to:
VICTOR J. EVANS & CO., Registered Patent Attorneys,
591-G, Victor Building, Washington, D. C.

COLITIS VICTIMS

Due to Faulty Diet, Hyperacidity, Constipation

Why suffer distressing agony when the relief you seek might be right here within your grasp? Poor digestion, gas, bloating are the warning signals. Countless sufferers have successfully fought these conditions with the KOLOKAY METHOD. M. L. Van Zandt writes: "I have been troubled with mucous colitis (due to faulty diet) for years. Never received relief from any medicine until I used KOLOKAY." Write today for generous free sample and illustrated booklet.

FREE TRIAL
EAST K-O-KOL COMPANY
Desk 194 West Chester, Pa.

FALSE TEETH

AS LOW AS $6.95

30 DAYS' TRIAL
WEAR THEM
TEST THEM
EXAMINE THEM

You have satisfaction of MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE. Customers in United States and Canada report SATISFACTION by My Method founded on 30 YEARS' EXPERIENCE.
SEND NO MONEY WRITE TODAY for FREE BOOKLET and MATERIAL
DR. CLEVELAND DENTAL LABORATORY
Dept. 2-HO, East St. Louis, Illinois

THE NEW COLLEGE HUMOR 15c EVERYWHERE

Your Life Insured up to $1000 . . only $1 a month

One-Half Regular Rate First Five Years!
No Doctor's Examination! No Agent will call!

Actual Policy Mailed for FREE Inspection

A new LOW-Cost Special 20-Payment Life Insurance Policy for Men, Women and Children. Age 1 day to 55 Years. Double Indemnity! Liberal Cash and Loan values! SEND NO MONEY! If you are in good health and under 55 years of age write TODAY to American Life and Acc. Ins. Co., 269A, American Life Bldg., St. Louis, Mo., sending your full name, date of birth, race, height, weight, duties of occupation, name and relationship of your beneficiary, and condition of your health. Your policy will be mailed at once for FREE inspection! No red tape! No obligation! No agent will call! Save by mail—Write NOW!

FREE SAMPLES OF REMARKABLE TREATMENT FOR

Stomach Ulcers

Due to Gastric Hyperacidity

H. H. Bromley, of Shelburne, Vt., writes: "I suffered for years with acid-stomach trouble. My doctors told me I had ulcers and would have to diet the rest of my life. Before taking your treatment I lost a lot of weight and could eat nothing but soft foods and milk. After taking Von's Tablets, I felt perfectly well, ate almost anything and gained back the weight I had lost." If you suffer from indigestion, gastritis, heartburn, bloating or any other stomach trouble due to gastric hyperacidity, you, too, should try Von's for prompt relief. Send for FREE Samples of this treatment and details of guaranteed trial offer. Instructive Booklet is included. Write

PHILADELPHIA VON CO. **Dept. 62-H**
Fox Building, Philadelphia, Pa.

SONG POEMS WANTED

TO BE SET TO MUSIC
Free Examination. Send Your Poems to
J. CHAS. McNEIL, MASTER OF MUSIC
510-TF So. Alexandria **Los Angeles, Calif.**

MAKE MORE MONEY

Taking Orders For The NIMROD Line

Earn more every day in the year representing old established firm with a complete line of fast selling necessities: Shirts of all kinds, Ties, Underwear, Hosiery, Raincoats, Sweaters, Pants, Belts, Breeches, Shoes, Coveralls, Shop Coats, Uniforms, Summer Suits, etc. Every item guaranteed. Experience unnecessary.

Write quick for FREE SALES EQUIPMENT
NIMROD COMPANY
4022-J Lincoln Ave., Chicago, Ill.

NOW a DYNAMIC HEAVY DUTY INDUSTRIAL WELDER

for Only $19.95 RETAIL

WORKS ON 110-Volt Light Socket. This marvelous Dynamic Power Welder does the work of much higher priced types. It is easily portable. WELDS Cylinder Blocks, Bumpers, Fenders, Tanks, Farm Machinery, etc. Will also solder and braze on the lightest material. Works on iron, steel, tin, brass, copper and all other metals. Men without previous experience can make as much as $5.00 on a one hour repair job. In a year's time a Dynamic Welder COSTS YOU LESS THAN 6 CENTS A DAY

Instructions Free—Open a welding shop now. AGENTS—Make big profits selling to garages, factories, janitors and machine shops. Write today for our 10-DAY TRIAL OFFER. DYNAMIC WELDER COMPANY, 2226-MM, SILVERTON ROAD, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS.

(Concluded on page 143)

give yuh ROMANCE RIDES THE RIO, an exciting complete novel of gun gallantry, by JACKSON COLE —an' MAVERICK GIRL, a plumb breath-taking range battle novelet by JOHNSTON McCULLEY—an' them two scribblers shore knows how tuh sit th' wild ones an' never grab leather.

Then we're also givin' yuh a heap more every bit as good, from cover tuh cover, includin' HARD-PAN'S DAUGHTER, a novelet of valley hearts by EUGENE A. CLANCY—Yuh'll shore be needin' yore spurs tuh keep up with them stories, folks. Hard fightin', true lovin' pals o' th' range, ev'ry one of 'em, an' then some.

An' next time yuh-all comes lopin' over th' hills, I'll be right yere, Johnny on th' Spot, keepin' this BRANDING FIRE blazin' sky high an' yellin' fer yuh tuh come an' git it; an' we'll have plenty more range yarns tuh spin.

Till then, ev'rybody, *hola!*

—TEX BROWN.

THRILLING RANCH STORIES
22 West 48th Street
New York

DEAR TEX: Please enroll me as a member of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB and send me my membership identification card. I agree to be active in keeping the Branding Fire Burning.

Name .....

Address .....

City .....

State ..... Age.....

Favorite Hobbies .....

I am enclosing a stamped self-addressed envelope in which you are to mail my membership card.

Signed .....

Date .....

Foreign readers are required to send International Reply Coupons or American stamps.

6-40

MISSING PAGE

145

MISSING PAGE

146

NEW LIFE POLICY INSURES WHOLE FAMILY FOR ONLY $1.00 PER MONTH

One Policy Protects Entire Sullivan Family, 5344 Foster Ave., Chicago, Ill.

UP TO $3,000.00 BENEFITS!

For Only $1.00 Per Month

Ages 1 to 75!

Men—Women—Children

$3,000 maximum in event of travel death as outlined in this marvelous Family Group Policy.

$2,000 maximum in event of death by auto as shown in the policy.

$1,000 maximum in event of ordinary or natural death as explained in the policy.

PAYS FOR DEATH FROM ANY CAUSE!

SEND COUPON FOR FREE DETAILS ! !

FROM BABY TO GRANDPARENTS!

One Policy, One Premium, One Price!

Now you can insure your whole family at amazing LOW COST! Think of it! $1.00 per month protects entire family—husband and wife, their parents, and children! Pays benefits for death from any cause, as specified in the policy.

NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION! NO AGENT CALL!

No medical examination of any family member required. Just mail coupon for full details how to get the Family Group Policy for Free Inspection. No agent will call.

UNDER STATE GOVERNMENT SUPERVISION!

The Family Group Policy issued by the Marquette Life Insurance Company is under state government supervision. Pays cash for death from natural causes or accidental injuries as stated in the policy.

LEGAL RESERVE BASIS!

Approved securities, equal to the full legal reserve for every Marquette policy in force, are locked in the vaults of the State of Illinois.

SEND NO MONEY!

Remember, you do not send one cent! Just mail coupon. No obligation! No agent will call!

MARQUETTE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
Desk 71, Jefferson Station, Chicago, Ill.

NO AGENT WILL CALL!

MARQUETTE LIFE INSURANCE CO.
Desk 71, Jefferson Station, Chicago, Ill.

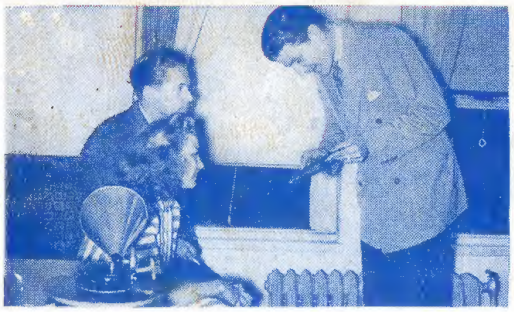
Please send details how to get the Family Group Insurance Policy for Free Inspection without obligation.

Name _____

Address _____

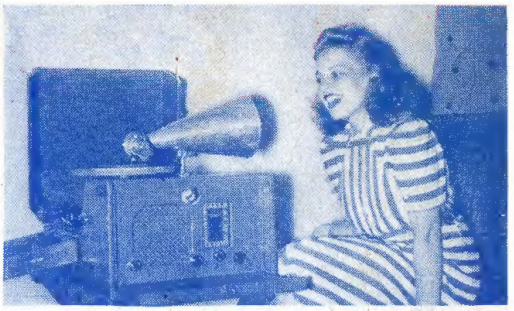
City _____ State _____

Charlie Barnet Uses Home Recordo!



Charlie Barnet in his private hotel suite checking a duet by Judy Ellington and Larry Taylor, Vocalists in his band.

You, Too, Can Make Your Own Records if You Sing or Play an Instrument



Judy Ellington heard in Charlie Barnet's Band making a Home Recordo record for her personal album.

MAKE YOUR OWN RECORDS AT HOME

Before spending money for an audition, make a "home record" of your voice or musical instrument and mail it to a reliable agency . . . you might be one of the lucky ones to find fame and success through this easy method of bringing your talents before the proper authorities.

Larry Taylor, Vocalist in Charlie Barnet's Band, listening to a play back of a recording he just made with Home Recordo.

Now a new invention permits you to make a professional-like recording of your own singing, talking or instrument playing. Any one can quickly and easily make phonograph records and play them back at once. Record your voice or your friends' voices. If you play an instrument you can make a record and you and your friends can hear it as often as you like. You can also record orchestras or favorite radio programs right off the air and replay them whenever you wish.

Everything is included. Nothing else to buy and nothing else to pay. You get complete HOME RECORDING UNIT, which includes special recording needle, playing needles, 6 two-sided unbreakable records. Also guide record and spiral feeding attachment and combination recording and play-back unit suitable for recording a skit, voice, instrument or radio broadcast. ADDITIONAL 2-SIDED BLANK RECORDS COST ONLY $.75 per dozen.

OPERATES ON ANY A.C. OR D.C.
ELECTRIC PHONOGRAPHS
RECORD PLAYERS
RADIO-PHONO COMBINATIONS
Old or New Type
PHONOGRAPHS and PORTABLES

IT'S LOTS OF FUN TOO! HAVING RECORDING PARTIES!

You'll get a real thrill out of HOME RECORDING. Surprise your friends by letting them hear your voice or playing right from a record. Record a snappy talking feature. Record jokes and become the life of the party. Great to help train your voice and to cultivate speech. Nothing to practice . . . you start recording at once . . . no other mechanical or electrical devices needed . . . everything necessary included. Nothing else to buy. Just sing, speak or play and HOME RECORDO unit, which operates on any electric or old type phonograph, will do the recording on special blank records we furnish. You can immediately play the records back as often as you wish. Make your home movie a talking picture with HOME RECORDO. Simply make the record while filming and play back while showing the picture.

Charlie Barnet with his arranger, Bill May, often check new arrangemen.s on Home Recordo.

SEND NO MONEY! HURRY COUPON!
START RECORDING AT ONCE!

COMPLETE OUTFIT $2.98

INCLUDING SIX TWO-SIDED BLANK RECORDS ONLY

HOME RECORDING CO.
Studio KH
11 WEST 17TH STREET. NEW YORK, N. Y.

HOME RECORDING CO.
STUDIO KH, 11 WEST 17TH ST.
New York, N. Y.

Send entire HOME RECORDING OUTFIT (including 6 two-sided records) described above, by return mail. I will pay postman $2.98, plus postage, on arrival. (Send cash or money order now for $3.00 and save postage.)

Send ..... doz. additional blank records at $.75 per dozen.

Name .....

Address .....

City and State .....

Note: Canadian and Foreign $3.50 cash with order.